

KARL BARTH AND THE EAST

The recently published pamphlet in which the distinguished Protestant theologian Karl Barth seems to urge Christian "acceptance" of the Eastern Communist regimes has provoked international comment. The following is a substantial excerpt from an editorial which appeared in the February 4 Christian Century.

Karl Barth is currently the center of a storm over a 45-page pamphlet published in November by a Basle publishing house over his name. Entitled "Letter to a Pastor in the German Democratic Republic," the pamphlet is interpreted to be an appeal to East German Protestants to desist from their resistance to Communist policies while not urging active support of Communist leaders.

We have not yet seen a copy of the Barth pamphlet, so lack the basis for a first-hand judgment. Religious News Service quotes Dr. Barth as describing oppression and persecution as "useful scourges" to purify the church of complacency and self-assurance. Since East German Christians suffer persecution at the hands of the Communists, presumably this comment is intended to influence their attitude toward their persecutors. Dr. Barth said that adversity and suffering are "God's tools." He presented what he called the "American way of life" as a greater danger than Communism. In reply to a question as to whether it was right to try to "pray away" the East German Communist regime, he said that required accepting before God the responsibility for such a prayer: "Might you not fear that He might grant your prayer in the frightful fashion of letting you awake one morning among the fleshpots of Egypt as a man bounden to the American way of life?" He also wrote that the East Germans had nothing worse to fear than "liberation in accordance with the ideas of [Chancellor Konrad] Adenauer." While he denounced life in the West, the theologian did not express any admiration for life under the Communists.

As a matter of fact, such an expression was superfluous if the general trend of his remarks was what the above quotations suggest it was. He was saying, if the above is a true indication, to the hard-beset pastors in the East Zone: Submit. Endure. Do not resist, actively or passively, the Communist regime. It

is the will of God that it rule over you. He also seemed to say: Do resist the West.

Dr. Barth's tolerance toward the evils he finds in the East is not matched by a similar attitude toward evils he finds in the West. "The message of Christ is as repulsive and painful to the West as to the East," he wrote. "Who knows, perhaps it is more painful and repulsive to the West than to the East." He recognized that the East is dominated by "open totalitarianism" but said the West is infected by "creeping totalitarianism" and implied he thought the latter was the more insidious evil.

While it is permissible to hope that the full text of Dr. Barth's statement may soften the harshness of some parts of this judgment, it is quite likely that its main burden will not be lightened. He has spoken in this vein before, as he indicated in his pamphlet. "These have always been my opinions." Concerning them several observations might be made.

First, it is our duty to acknowledge that "the American way of life" has its serious limitations. We constantly confess its sins, so there is no reason why we may not agree that it does sin. This way of life tempts Christians and other men to pride and complacency, to conformity to standards which are not the standards of the gospel, to materialism and other forms of idolatry.

Second, we need not acknowledge and do not for a moment admit that the Communist system is less subject to critical Christian judgment. On this point we believe Dr. Barth errs, as he has repeatedly done in the past. Why is this man, who condemned Naziism, blind to the evil of totalitarianism when it appears in its Communist form?

Third, we are not ashamed that we have the freedom to exercise critical self-judgment and to express this judgment openly. Instead, we hold this freedom is the mark of an order which is capable of reform and so is subject to divine discipline. By Christian standards this freedom should be the decisive element in any comparison that can fairly be made between the two ways of life. Does freedom mean nothing to Dr. Barth?

Fourth, Communist oppressions and persecutions may be in God's hands "scourges," "tools" and purifiers, but this action of divine providence in no way excuses or justifies oppressors and persecutors . . .