Why Is Barth Silent on Hungary?

By Reinhold Niebuhr

THE WHOLE WORLD has been thrilled by the spontaneity and the stubbornness of the Hungarian rebellion against Russian despotism. As George Kennan and Bedell Smith predicted, the monolithic structure of communist tyranny cracked first in the satellite nations, where patriotism united with love of freedom to offer resistance; and Poland and Hungary were the first to offer resistance. We need not now go into the details of the difference between the Poles, who were able to contain their revolution within peaceful Titoist limits, and the Hungarians, who were so outraged by the Russian guns, turned on peaceful demonstrators that their hatred of the oppressor knew no bounds. They sought absolute freedom from Russia; and their revolution was suppressed in a bloodbath which has destroyed permanently whatever prestige still adhered to the communist ideology in eastern Europe and among the intellectuals and neutralist theologians of the continent. It is enough to record that the regime in Hungary, which seemed to have the uneasy acceptance of the people, was proved by recent events to have been so oppressive that it piled up resentments, resulting in a heroic defiance which astonished and thrilled, as well as saddened, the whole world.

I

Our purpose is to analyze the record of Europe's most famous and imaginative theologian, Karl Barth, in relation to recent Hungarian history. Nothing in that record can dim the theological achievements of this man, who was the chief instigator of the neo-Reformation theology, which challenged the liberalism in religious and secular society that had reigned in Western culture in the 19th century and was finally destroyed by the historical realities culminating in the First World War.

Nor can Barth's record on Hungary change the glory of his relation to the resistance movements in the nazi period, though it is now obvious that that resistance was dictated by personal experiences with tyranny and not by the frame of his theology, which was, before Hitler as now, too "eschatological" and too transcendent to offer any guidance for the discriminating choices that political responsibility challenges us to. Barth was the theologian of the antinazi resistance in the whole of Europe. In his famous letter to Hromadka (who is ironically involved with him now in the toils of neutralism), he went so far as to say that a Czech soldier fighting the Germans would be serving Christ. His partisanship was probably too extreme, as his neutralism now is too undiscriminating. But let past history stand. Karl Barth will of course be properly scornful of any attempt to judge his theology by its political fruits; he would have it judged by its adequacy in interpreting "the Word of God." But let us be scriptural and follow the axiom, "By their fruits shall ye know them," remembering that political justice and wisdom must be one of the fruits by which any system of thought is to be judged.

What has all this to do with Hungary and its revolution? The link is established by Barth's intimate connection with the Reformed Church of Hungary and by the confusing advice he offered it. Barth was, in fact, a kind of unofficial pope of the Hungarian Reformed Church. When the church adopted a new constitution it submitted the articles to Barth for approval. When the communist government dismissed Bishop Ravazs and suggested the election of Bishop Bereczky, the church leaders asked Barth whether it was correct to elect a bishop favored by the government. Barth answered that the favor or disfavor of the government should be irrelevant to the church if the opinions of the bishop were theologically correct. Bereczky was in fact a devout, theologically correct and timid man. So he was acceptable to both Barth and the communist government, and so he was elected. That government, it should

be recalled, was headed by the notorious Rakosi, who had contrived the execution of the other leader, Rajk. Both men were implicated in "Titoism"—a crime in Stalin's eyes—and Rakosi saved himself by sacrificing his partner. Rakosi was dismissed just before the revolution in the vain effort to appease the wrath of the Hungarian people.

Another bishop was appointed—John Peter, who was certainly not "theologically correct" because he has since confessed that he was a party member; but it is not recorded that Barth gave him the imprimatur. Peter did represent the church at Evanston, though the state department kept him under surveillance, knowing his now confessed record, as the church leaders did not. Needless to say, Bishop Peter gave Evanston some very pious accounts of the church in Hungary; and, also needless to say, he confused some church leaders outside Hungary. But he did not confuse the faithful pastors and people of the Hungarian churches. Many of these have since perished in the revolution and thousands of them have fled their fatherland.

Barth had a rather triumphant tour in Hungary, and all his thoughts about the issues of church and state in a tyranny are faithfully recorded in his collection of occasional writings entitled *Against the Stream* (1954). A Hungarian Christian asked him, for instance, whether it was right for a Christian to cooperate with a communist government. Barth answered: "We shall never see a state either in its pure form as an ordinance of God or in its complete diabolical perversion. These are the two frontiers between which history moves." Thus the possibility of a diabolical government's appearing in history was excluded in principle. This did not change the fact that the Hungarians had direct experience of the demonic in their own government.

If one inquires why a man of so wise and robust a mind as Karl Barth should have come to such false conclusions in a specific historical case, and why he should have been so sure of himself that he did not inquire of the Hungarian Christians instead of lecturing to them, one must look for the answer in the confidently held theological frame of reference, and also in the lower political frame of reference. One must inquire about the latter as well as the former, for even a theologian who thinks he can solve everything by drawing on the wisdom of the "Word of God" is a man who makes his decisions about proximate ends according to his political presuppositions.

II

Karl Barth's theological framework is defective for wise political decisions for two reasons. The first is that he is too consistently "eschatological" for the "nicely calculated less and more" which must go into political decisions. In his essay "The Christian Community and Political Change" he declares: "The goal toward which we are moving is the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The message of the church is a message of hope for everyone. Alternations in political systems must stand in the light of this great change, which is called Jesus Christ. It would be curious if the church, which knows of this one great change, could not accept with a certain calm certain smaller changes."

The "certain smaller changes" which are to be accepted with calm are, for instance, the change from comparative political freedom to despotism. Not being a theologian, I can only observe that if one reaches a very high altitude, in either an eschatological or a real airplane, all the distinctions which seem momentous on the "earthly" level are dwarfed into insignificance. Since Barth had much to do with the eschatological theme of the World Council of Churches' Evanston assembly, one wonders whether his presence at Evanston would have changed the atmosphere and made the eschatology more relevant to the unimaginative and common-sense "Anglo-Saxon" mind.

The second defect in Barth's theological approach to political and moral problems is his extreme pragmatism, which disavows all moral principles. In answering Emil Brunner's question, "Why do you not oppose totalitarianism now, as you did then [in the nazi period]?" Barth declared: "The church must concern itself with political systems, not in terms of principles but as seen in the light of the Word of God. ... It must reject every effort to systematize political history and must look at every event afresh." Without the guidance of principles and looking at every event afresh in the light of the Word of God, Barth comes to the capricious conclusion that communism is not as bad as nazism because it is not anti-Semitic. "It is a question," declared Barth, "whether it was the totalitarianism, or the barbarism, nihilism and anti-Semitism, which was the chief sin of nazism." A little concern for "principles" would have instructed Barth that some of the barbarism of nazism was derived from the same monopoly of irresponsible power from which the barbarism of communism is derived. Looking at every event afresh means that one is ignorant about the instructive, though inexact, analogies of history which the "godless" scientists point out for our benefit.

A Catholic theologian has defined the Barthian approach to the political order as "designed for the church of the catacombs." The description is accurate: Barth's view makes no provision for discriminating judgments, both because of its strong eschatological emphasis and because of the absence of principles and structures of value.

"The Christian church," Barth writes, "is independent of all political changes, inasmuch as it is grounded in the Word of God and committed solely to his word. It can therefore see ancient and modem political systems as nothing but halting and restricted human efforts, the furthering or opposing of which it must not confuse with its proper mission." This advice would be more palatable if Barth were not so interested in passing political judgments while he constructs a theology which disavows political responsibility in principle. He has a framework for these political judgments, which can be discerned below the level of his theological framework.

An unkind critic might suggest that the framework is an arrested 19th century Marxism, by which he judges between "capitalistic" and "socialistic" nations; a kind of Marxism that, despite Barth's theological avoidance of "systems," is not sufficiently alert to the fresh constellations of history to realize that the capitalism of the West may have corrupted, but did not destroy, democracy, while the "socialism" of communism did produce absolute despotism. But this criticism would not be fair, because Barth is no Christian Marxist. He disavows the Marxist creed resolutely, as does his fellow-traveling Czech disciple, Hromadka. The Marxist creed is in his subconscious but not in his conscious approach to things.

Thus in reporting on his trip to Hungary Barth wrote: "I did not find a single outright believer in the new system in Hungary ... . Enthusiasm for the Red Dean [Hewlett Johnson of Canterbury], who visited Hungary before my visit, aroused astonishment among the Reformed Christians ... . But the Reformed church also resisted the opposite temptation of Rome—that of entering opposition as a matter of principle. I met no responsible Reformed Christian who thought that one ought to take the line of political resistance as a matter of political principle."

In fairness to Barth it must be said that, while he obviously did not meet in Hungary the kind of Reformed Christians who not only resisted as a matter of principle but suffered heroically in doing so, his approach to things has been more creative in East Germany, where political resistance is absolutely impossible because of the weight of Russian military upon that Soviet outpost. There Barth's eschatological emphasis has inspired a kind of religious resistance which has permitted the East German Christians to bear witness to their faith and to assert their dignity as men, without raising false hopes and fears in the political realm.

III

Some of the political framework of Barth's judgments is furnished by his ill-disguised anti-Americanism and by what he regards as our "worship of the dollar." Some of it is given by his belief that the struggle is not between communism and democracy but between Slav and German. In his lecture on "The Church between East and West" he declared: "Russia signifies not only communism but the resurgence of the Slavonic races, which thrust back the German thrust toward the east." But the political struggle between the East and West, according to Barth, is complicated by another factor: the struggle between America and Russia. "Russia and America," he declares, "are both in different ways children of Europe ... . They have both suddenly grown into giants, who each in his own way would like to be patron, benefactor and protector of Europe. Both are afraid of encirclement by the other." Then Barth adds a final word which certainly does not follow from the "Word of God," for he declares: "One must concede that the anxiety of the Eastern giant is better founded than that of the Western giant, when one considers the total ring of Western bastions."

One is amazed by the number of technical, strategic and political presuppositions which entered into these hazardous judgments. We are men and not God, and all our political judgments are bound to be hazardous. If we are also theologians we ought to have the grace to repeat the Pauline warning from time to time: "Thus say I, and not the Lord," so that our hearers will not regard a stray political opinion as a deliverance *ex cathedra.*

One could forgive Barth many things because he is a creative and imaginative theologian, who is also interested in politics. One could even forgive him his many capricious judgments in politics, though one might well wish that he would study the realities of the political order a little more if he is going to speak about them so much. But the one failing that is difficult to forgive is that he has not modestly confessed himself in error about Hungary. He seemed to know so much about Hungary, and history has refuted his judgments so absolutely.

The godless existentialist Jean Paul Sartre has broken with communism and denounced its actions in Hungary. Even the lowly party hacks in the Communist parties of Britain and France have been shocked. But Barth's Czech disciple Hromadka has issued a pathetic defense of the Hungarian government, and Barth himself has remained silent. Surely one could have expected as much of the world's most eminent Protestant theologian as of the assistant editor of the *London Daily Worker,* who publicly disavowed all his former illusions.

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