

[1957. *Study in Apologetics. Review of Christian Commitment: An Apologetic*, by Edward John Carnell. *Christianity Today* 2 Sep., pp. 36-38.]

## STUDY IN APOLOGETICS

*Christian Commitment: An Apologetic*, by Edward John Carnell, Macmillan. \$5.00.

This book on Christian apologetics by the president of Fuller Theological seminary is divided into two unequal parts. The last third or fourth of the volume is a statement of the Christian position; the much longer first part consists of arguments by which the author recommends to his readers the theology of the conclusion.

The theology begins with a fine statement of the need of propitiating an offended God. If you and I require propitiation after someone despises the dignity of our person, God does so all the more. Christ is the propitiation—Christ's death in the stead of sinner. "Only Jesus Christ can lead a sinner from moral ruin to judicial restoration ... We can determine our place in God by simply naming our federal head."

This biblical emphasis on propitiation and federal headship is a needed one today when so many have weak notions of God's righteousness and sovereignty. Unfortunately some later phrases are confusing. "Let no one caricature this by saying that only those who contemplate the atonement can be saved. Abraham did not know the cross, yet he was justified. The Scriptures say that all who believe in God will be saved ... Men prove their respect for God by repenting." (p. 296).

Does this mean that faith in Christ is not absolutely necessary to salvation? Will faith in God suffice? And would a Mohammedan's faith in God suffice, as [at?] least if he repents? The precise meaning of the paragraph is not clear, yet evidently the words bear a sense that can be taken as disparagement of foreign missions, for the author tries immediately to justify missions on the ground that generic repentance is perilous and uncertain. "The Apostle Paul [limited] repentance almost (!) exclusively to the active preaching of the gospel. Not that men *cannot* repent without being confronted with Christ after the flesh, but that they *do* not repent with such confrontation" (p. 297).

However, since the book is a book on apologetics, the main interest lies in the arguments by which the author attempts to recommend his theology to his readers.

As may be expected a large part of the earlier chapters deals with epistemology. "Ultimate reality cannot be grasped unless rational knowledge is savored by spiritual conviction" (p. 13). President Carnell does not deny the need of rational knowledge, but he denies its sufficiency. But what "savoring" ultimate reality is, and how "spiritual conviction" is distinguished from rational knowledge

are not explained.

The author begins by placing some emphasis on knowledge by acquaintance. He contrasts it with knowledge by inference (p. 17) and seems to identify it with presentational immediacy. A number of contemporary philosophers make use of the notion of knowledge by acquaintance. It is usually immediate awareness of sense data completely apart from interpretation. It is not knowledge by description. As Bergson says, a quality “inscribes itself automatically in sensation.”

Unhappily, after contrasting acquaintance with inference, the author confuses the reader by stating that all knowledge is inferential. Even “knowledge by acquaintance is the passage of the mind to a conclusion without the aid of a middle premise” (p. 17). This statement brings to mind chiefly what the logicians call immediate inference. For example: All triangles contain 180 degrees; therefore some triangles, equilateral triangles, contain 180 degrees. This inference has no middle term and no middle premise. But it is not the customary notion of knowledge by acquaintance.

It is in fact difficult to grasp the author's concept of knowledge. He defines knowledge as “man's systematic contact with the real.” He explicitly notes that this does not require consciousness. “I assert that man can be systematically in contact with the real without knowing it. But this want of awareness in no way alters the reality of the knowledge” (p. 29). This quotation contains a self-contradiction. If systematic contact with reality is knowledge, then a man cannot be in such contact with reality without knowing it, for the contact is the knowledge. Furthermore, if consciousness or awareness is not necessary to knowledge, then breathing and digestion are forms of knowledge because they are systematic contacts with reality. Here one must question whether such unconscious “knowledge” is a contribution to epistemology.

Another and more emphasized factor in Dr. Carnell's epistemology is his theory of moral self-commitment. There are certain truths that become immediately clear as soon as we take ourselves seriously. If we stop making philosophy a mere academic game and examine our own sincere reactions to the concerns of life, we shall have insight. In one place the author states as a self-evident truth so obtained, “Whenever people receive us because of a respect for rational self-consistency, we are offended” (p. 67). This somewhat pontifical dictum is one which the reviewer is not so willing to accept. Really, I am not offended when people accept me because of rational self-consistency. I might even be flattered. But I am not flattered when it is said that my lack of insight into this truth is the result of my insincerity. In another place the author dismisses a conflicting opinion as “ossified” (p. 151).

In addition to these criticisms in detail something should be said about the general method. While the book cannot be accurately styled a form of the cosmological argument, yet it is an attempt to understand God by observations of man. “If the meaning of God's character cannot be anticipated by

information drawn from our own conception of decency ... [and] unless we can meaningfully anticipate God's standards of rectitude, it may turn out that the book, church, or precisely caste that is least moral on human standards is most moral on divine standards" (p. 142).

This line of reasoning will commend itself to those who believe that the cosmological argument is valid. It also commends itself to those who like Kant believe that theology should be founded on ethics rather than ethics on theology. In fact, it is standard procedure of those who wish to oppose the theology Dr. Carnell stands for. Did not Mary Baker Eddy write that anyone who accepts the concept of a substitutionary sacrifice has failed to understand the character of God? Have not many other opposed historical Christian doctrines on the ground that they are immoral? And in view of the noetic distortions caused by sin, is it not likely that men should fail to anticipate God's standards of rectitude? Would it not therefore be better to appeal to revelation rather than to anticipation? Must we not conclude that theology is basic to ethics and that ethics is derivative?

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