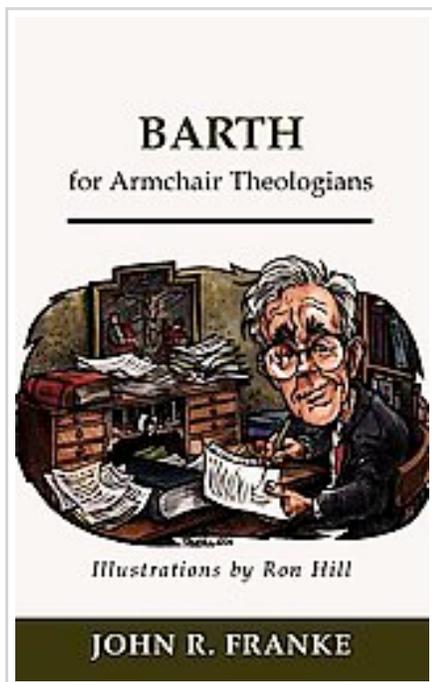


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thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2007

Book Review: "Barth for Armchair Theologians" by John R. Franke



The following book review will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Reviews in Religion and Theology*. I am permitted to post it on my website prior to publication, so I thought I'd share my thoughts on John Franke's *Barth for Armchair Theologians* as this week's thursday theological thought.

It is notoriously difficult to summarize the contribution of any truly great theologian. This is especially true of Karl Barth on account of the quantity and complexity of his work. And yet John Franke has managed to produce a short overview of

Barth's life and thought that is both accurate and accessible. The book's accessibility is aided by its remarkable brevity and amusing illustrations.

Franke wisely places Barth's theology within its historical context. He provides just enough biographical data to coherently narrate Barth's development without getting lost in minutia. In the first chapter, Franke describes the liberal theological tradition into which Barth was immersed as a student. Franke outlines the responses of Schleiermacher and Ritschl to the theological challenge of the Enlightenment and explains how Barth was initiated into a particular form of this tradition through his teacher, Wilhem Herrmann. Conspicuously absent from Franke's narrative are Troeltsch and Harnack, both of whom are crucial for understanding Barth's break

About Me



Name:
JohnLDrury
Location:
Doylestown,
Pennsylvania, US

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with liberalism. This chapter also runs the risk of perpetuating unfair prejudices against protestant theology in the nineteenth century. But as it stands, this chapter is an adequate introduction to Barth's liberal heritage from the vantage point of Barth's own understanding of it.

In the two following chapters, Franke tells the story of Barth's break with liberalism and the beginnings of his new theology. Franke shows how religious socialism and the Great War occasioned Barth's discovery of the strange new world of the Bible. He then discusses the significance of Barth's Romans commentary, especially regarding its critique of religion and dialectical approach to theological language.

The next two chapters trace Barth's development from his explosion on the theological scene to his expulsion from Germany by the Nazis. Franke treats Barth's engagement with the Reformed tradition, his programmatic essays on dialectical theology, and his first cycle of dogmatics lectures at Göttingen in a chapter bearing the title, "The Impossibility Possibility." This title is unfortunate because Franke uses this phrase to describe Barth's dialectical theology, whereas Barth uses the same phrase to describe sin! Franke then tells of Barth's interaction with Roman Catholics at Münster and his courageous conflict with the Nazis at Bonn.

Franke dedicates the remainder of the book to introducing Barth's Church Dogmatics and assessing Barth's legacy. These last two chapters contain Franke's most significant contribution. In an appropriately lengthy chapter, Franke offers what he aptly calls a "basic orientation tour" of the Church Dogmatics. After describing its method, shape, and motifs, Franke deftly summarizes this 8,000-page work in a mere 33 pages. He then concludes his book with an equally impressive tour of the contemporary reception of Barth's theology. Franke identifies two tendencies in Barth interpretation (the neo-orthodox and the postmodern) and critically incorporates both within Barth's own dialectic of veiling and unveiling.

Franke's book performs a nearly impossible task: introduce the theology of Karl Barth without overwhelming its readers by complexity or underwhelming its readers by simplicity. It is therefore an ideal textbook for introductory courses in theology.

Any Thoughts?

What impression would you have of Franke's book if you'd only read this review?

What did you think of Franke's book (if you've read it)?

What is the best way to present accessibly the ideas of a great theologian?

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At [6:47 PM, February 25, 2007](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Well, I confess that I only read the first two chapters of this book. I was visiting someone else who owned it and could only snatch reading between conversations. I guess not finishing a whole book that is "for Armchair Theologians" makes me a Theologian Couch-Potato.

Not being a Barth scholar like yourself it's good to know about the absence of some of the biographical elements--particularly with the break from liberalism which is perhaps the most facinating legacy of the "life" of Barth if not the theology.

Good review here.

If I had only read this review and not the book I would likely pick it up as a primer if I knew little of Barth and didn't expect to read a lot on him (but just a taste). I'd also want to see a theological book with "funny illustrations." (And as I recall they were pretty darn funny--if you're a theologian-nerd in particular).

Well done.

I anticipate the "Quotable John Drury" or the "John Drury for Armchair Theologians" some day.

-David

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