Marquardt, Friedrich-Wilhelm

| Friedlander, Albert H.

Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (2.12. 1928 - 25.5. 2002)

Professor Dr. Friedrich Marquardt died a gentle death, sitting with his wife on a park bench in Berlin, and departing from life with quiet dignity. His life was anything but quiet. From the very beginning of his career, he had been a troublemaker within German Protestantism. His doctoral dissertation, in 1967, was entitled "The Discovery of Judaism for Christian Theology: Israel in the Thought of Karl Barth". It demanded that the great Karl Barth re-examine his attitude towards post-Biblical Judaism which not only related to the Crucified Jesus but also to the Risen Christ; otherwise, said Marquardt, Barth"s view of Israel could contain dark anti-Jewish dimensions.

From the beginning, some of his colleagues seemed to feel, that Marquardt was too involved with the Holocaust and the Christian responsibility; and that he stressed the Jewish content of Christianity far too strongly. Together with his mentor Professor Helmut Gollwitzer, whom he succeeded as professor of theology at the Free University of Berlin, he had been involved with the founding of the "Working Group of Jews and Christians at the Kirchentag".The Kirchentag meets every two years and attracts close to two hundred thousand who attend this key event of German Protestantism regularly. The very fact that Jews and Christians here met in dialogue and presented joint papers and discussions on the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible was considered something of a scandal by the conservative Christian wing, not lessened by the fact that the most popular and brilliant Christian theologians were to be found in that working group: Helmut Gollwitzer, Eberhard Bethge, Martin Stoehr, Marquardt himself, and great rabbinic scholars from all over the world discussed their relationship and shared biblical traditions which called for mutual respect. At the Nuremberg Kirchentag of 1979, his dialogue with a rabbi on "Auschwitz and the Silence of the Christians" attracted over 2000 listeners and had to be repeated the next day in an even larger conference hall.

It is not surprising that some of the most prominent Protestant publications in Germany remained silent when Marquardt died. "Not really one of us" ... "too much judaising" were overheard comments which tried to avoid an appreciation of one of the most prolific German Christian theologians of the 20th century. His friends continue to insist that it was Friedrich Marquardt, more than almost any Christian thinker of that time, who permitted the German churches to find their way back to honour and respectability by giving them a chance to repent and to acknowledge the errors which had flawed the image of the Church during the period between 1933 and 1945. His colleagues at the Free University of Berlin published an acknowledgement of his role as a voice of conscience for German Christianity. In it, they stated that "Professor Marquardt"s work throughout his life was devoted to the rediscovery and substantial acknowledgement of the essential roots of the Christian identity within Judaism. His seven volume Dogmatic text was the first attempt in the world to reformulate Christian self-understanding in terms of previously unused theological aspects of Judaism of its tradition. He set himself the task to free Christian teachings from its inherited anti-Judaism."

All of the dramatic tensions of 20th century German life can be seen in his biography. He was born into a loyal Nazi family, and his father walked through the streets of Berlin in his SS uniform during

the "Kristallnacht" pogrom in November 1938. The next day, Friedrich-Wilhelm saw the burned synagogues and torn Hebrew books on the streets. It left its imprint upon the 9 year old boy. However, the "proverbial" Jewish great-grandmother hindered the advancement of the Marquardts within the Nazi party. The family tried to destroy all the evidence of Marianne Salomon, and his mother"s family name changed from "von der Decken" to a non-aristocratic "Decken". The blot on the family tree remained. In one lecture, Marquardt recounts how he and his sister had to report to the Rasseamt, (Office on Race) to have their skulls measured – they were cleared as "racially pure". He remained an outsider, the rebel within his class. When barely 16, he and his class mates were inducted into the German army, and there was still room for some of his friends to die. He himself became a prisoner of war, and returned to a destroyed Germany in 1945.

Marquardt now moved towards religion as an area in which he might come to terms with the anguish of his time. At the University of Marburg, he studied with Rudolf Bultmann who had insisted upon the importance of bringing Heidegger"s existentialist philosophy into theological thinking. Later, in Basel, he became a student of Karl Barth and gained a balanced skepticism joined to an awareness of the social problems which must not be ignored by theologians. Marquardt became a pastor in Bavaria and in the Rhineland, where the clergy became involved in the fight against atomic weapons but also turned to the burning questions of the relationship to Jews and Judaism. In the late 50s, he came to Berlin as a pastor to the students of the Free University, immediately coming into conflict with Bishop Dibelius, but strongly supported by Helmut Gollwitzer. In 1959, he joined the first group of German students permitted to visit Israel, and this made an impact upon him. Also, during the student revolutions in the late 60s, Marquardt tried to mediate between the students and the authorities. (It is significant that one of his books was Rudi Dutschke as a Christian. These "authorities" never viewed him favourably. The "Cold War" conflicts made him a suspect to the German secret service. Marquardt suffered deeply under these attacks, particularly when the Kirchliche Hochschule deemed his "Habilitation" work in 1971 Theology and Socialism: the Example of Karl Barth too socialistic and "unscholarly". He left that theological faculty and concentrated upon his work at the Free University and his own writings. As an independent and original thinker he acquired his own following, together with many enemies. The "radical doubt" which he deemed essential for Christian faith did not endear him to the traditionalists. Marquardt wanted the Church to leave the security of the Academy and to re-discover its role within a troubled world. Perhaps, he thought, God had a greater task for the Church than the continuing reflection upon itself as an enduring tradition. His insistence that "Auschwitz was a judgement against Christianity" and "a call to repentance involving beyond ethical actions also theological changes" irritated not only theologians but also the general public. Marquardt revisited the world of the Bible and related Jewish life and thought, particularly during the time of Jesus, to the contemporary scene. He wanted Jesus to be understood in terms of his human, rather than his divine dimension; this, too, underscored the Jewish inheritance in Christianity.

Viewed within the context of his major writings, one comes to understand that Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt was a profound Christian thinker of the 20th century who created a completely new Dogmatics, a Christology, and an eschatology within which he wanted to renew a Christianity which had to return to its Biblical roots in order to shake off the sickness of centuries. What his critics failed to understand was that the whole structure, with all its radical criticism, was suffused by his love of Christ. His last sermon in the Jesus Christus Church in Berlin on April 28, 2002, ended with a prayer for Israel using the Song of Moses and Miriam:

"With them, and to them, we will sing our Agnus Dei together.
Lamb of God, who carries the sins of the world, give them and us your peace."

In many ways, Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt remained a very private person living within his family. His funeral was a quiet affair, conducted by his brothers who were also pastors, and it was not widely advertised. Until his last days, even though hindered by his illness, he worked on new texts.

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The next Kirchentag in Berlin in 2003 will be the first ecumenical one joined by the "Katholikentag"; the German Catholic Conference. A special program dedicated to the memory of Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt is already being planned. Somehow, this uncomfortable, prophetic voice within the Christian community will continue to haunt the comfortable traditionalists trying to live quietly within the Fortress Church.

Some recent writings, beyond the great 7 volume Dogmatics magnum opus, included a 3 volume Eschatology Was duerfen wir hoffen, wenn wir hoffen duerften (What may we hope, if we were permitted to hope) Gueterloh 1993, 1994, 1996; Eia, waern wir da – eine theologische Utopie , Guetersloh, 1997. Among his earlier works, there was Studenten im Protest, Frankfurt 1968; Von Elend und Heimsuchung der Theologie: Prolegoma zur Dogmatik, München 1988. Die Gegenwart des Auferstandenen bei seinem Volk Israel: Ein Dogmatisches Experiment, Kaiser Verlag 1983, which searched out new dimensions within Jesus by placing him within the Jewish people. His Nuremburg lecture on the silence of Christianity at the time of Auschwitz was published by Kaiser Verlag in 1980: Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt/Albert Friedlander, Das Schweigen der Christen und die Menschlichkeit Gottes; Gläubige Existenz nach Auschwitz, Kaiser Verlag 1980.

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