

A round-up of readers' comments on *Harper's* series of articles on Modern Religious Belief in America—chiefly on "I Call Myself a Protestant" by William Warren Bartley, III

PROTESTANT VOICES

*M*ANY hundreds of letters were received by Harper's in response to the series on Modern Religious Belief in America, and they are still pouring in as we go to press. A few of the letter writers tried to assess each of the essays. Perhaps Lee C. McDonald of Claremont, California, was the most succinct. He wrote:

(1) Walter Kaufmann ["The Faith of a Heretic," February] is intelligent, honest, and erudite; but doesn't quite know what religion is all about. That, no doubt, is what makes him a "free-thinker."

(2) Philip Scharper ["What a Modern Catholic Believes," March] is genuine, ingenuous, and possibly noble; but terribly defensive, despite which he managed to beg most of the questions a Protestant would want to ask about Catholicism.

(3) Arthur A. Cohen's ["Why I Choose to Be a Jew," April] piece was the best, a moving testament of faith, rationally expressed, with neither pretention nor apology.

(4) William Warren Bartley, III ["I Call Myself a Protestant," May] touched a vital nerve with his remarks about communication between Protestant clergy and laity; but his own state of being seems tragically close to Kaufmann's (tragic for Bartley, not necessarily for Kaufmann). He is driven to the leap of faith but clings to the hope that reason can show him the way to jump.

... I suppose it is only my Presbyterian bias which makes me sad that such a sensitive soul as Bartley still wants to choose his religion rather than accept the fact that he has been chosen.

However, most of the writers directed their fire—or their praise—specifically at one of the authors. Of all the contributors, by far the most controversial were Dr. Kaufmann and Mr. Bartley. Since comments on the essays by Walter Kaufmann, Philip Scharper, and Arthur Cohen have already appeared in our letters column in recent months, we are devoting most of this special section to letters about Mr. Bartley's article.

A good many correspondents objected to the choice of Mr. Bartley



James F. Coyne

WILLIAM WARREN BARTLEY, III
"I Call Myself a Protestant"

to write an essay about Protestantism. For instance, Dr. B. I. Lawrence, Professor Emeritus at Central College in Fayette, Missouri, wrote:

I protest! . . . The series of articles on modern religious beliefs has been a timely contribution to your readers and has been greatly enjoyed; however, William Warren Bartley, III was a most unfortunate choice to present Protestant beliefs. . . . He doubts the life after death, which certainly is not what Christ taught or what Protestants believe. His discussion of philosophic systems and their failures is all well enough for the philosopher, but no philosopher can rationalize Protestant belief in "Justification by Faith" or the "Resurrection." These are religious mysteries that Protestants accept on faith alone sans science, sans philosophy, sans Bartleys. . . .

I feel a grave disservice has been committed against a large segment of American readers and thinkers. Justice demands that some competent Protestant be given space. . . .

An eminent religious educator wrote: "You have failed to find a single representative of the largest body of Christians in the United States." And a number of readers nominated their own choice for such a representative.

However, the series was not intended to "represent" the dominant theologies in churches today—which are expounded every week in thou-



Lee Boltin

ARTHUR A. COHEN
"Why I Choose to Be a Jew"

sands of pulpits and publications—but to show how a group of able young thinkers have personally confronted religious alternatives. Certainly Mr. Bartley is not alone in his thinking—a considerable number of Protestants, especially younger ones, agreed with him at least in part. The Reverend Deane Starr of Providence, Rhode Island, wrote:

"I was reared in fundamentalism, nurtured in neo-orthodoxy, and am currently the minister of a Universalist church. Mr. Bartley has expressed my convictions in language that will haunt and prod me for many moons."

And many readers who did not agree were grateful for his statement. For instance, the Minister of a Congregational Church in Minnesota wrote:

"A congregation of Bartley III's might be challenging to preach to; the preacher could not resort to the old clichés which are often so comforting."

Several wrote in the same vein as Mrs. Donald E. Henley of Woodland Hills, California:

Perhaps my lack of knowledge of the publishing business makes me exaggerate the courage you have shown in printing views likely to antagonize so many people. However, I suspect that enough of your readers appreciate the sincerity of

the four writers to make up for those who would be insulted at finding their views criticized or questioned so honestly that they too must either question or accept themselves as hypocrites.

The total impact of the diversity of intelligent beliefs makes me realize once again the static nature of any close-minded, unquestioning acceptance of a single view.

One sharp point of controversy was Mr. Bartley's view that unbelief is widespread among theologians, clergymen, and lay people who are afraid to communicate their unbelief to others, but simply recite creeds



PHILIP SCHARPER
"What a Modern Catholic Believes"

and prayers as passwords. Mr. Stanley J. Rowland, Jr. of Teaneck, New Jersey, author of a recent book entitled *Land in Search of God*, disagreed:

From my own extensive research into religious life in America, I am quite aware of the situation he is trying to describe. . . . An unknown number of clergymen and laymen have reservations about the literal meaning of the creeds. However, these reservations typically do not deny the existence of God who acted through Christ, nor exclude a belief in life after death. They do lead to personal interpretations.

The doubts and personal interpre-

tations are typically not shared. To this extent, Mr. Bartley is correct in diagnosing a lack of fundamental communication between pulpit and pew. But he is wrong in suggesting a clear-cut situation of unshared disbelief on both sides. The questions are typically over definitions: what we mean, for example, when we say "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . ." Father how? What is "heaven"? How did He make it? (Here Paul Tillich has helped by leading us beyond the stumbling blocks that can be presented by ancient creedal definitions.) In other words, there are various shades of doubt and belief. The religious weather, like Mr. Bartley's piece, is foggy.

On the other hand, Wanda Clark of Wewoka, Oklahoma, thought that Bartley's description was entirely accurate:

I have worked closely in organized Protestantism for years and been a member most of my life and know the attitudes explored by Mr. Bartley are finding more followers each day, and with good reason. Many I know are doing as he said—withdrawing to the Unitarians, non-affiliating, or playing make-believe in the fold. But, it is a silent revolt—silent to avoid the hysterical charge



Orren Jack Turner

WALTER KAUFMANN
"The Faith of a Heretic"

of radical, atheist, or chronic malcontent that is often inflicted upon the so-called church "rebel." . . .

The church needs to face the truth about itself sanely. We badly need a new religion, not only because we are outgrowing the present one in some ways, but because we are also failing the present one. We have, as an organization, failed in our most important ideal, the brotherhood of man. Our churches cling rabidly to segregation of races and to social strata within the church. We have become afraid of new thought. . . .

The church needs leaders who will dare to heed the growing voices of discontent within it, who will encourage questioning of the doctrines of the church, who will do as Christ did, encouraging rebellion and change and individual thinking. It will take courage because the church, out of fear and ignorance, condemns as ungodly any voice raised to shake it from its ostrich-like lethargy.

The church is squeezing out thinkers like Mr. Bartley—and many others. . . . Thanks again for your fine article. It is encouraging [to find] a man who dares "rebel" against the accepted and orthodox of his time.

From the many detailed and lengthy critiques of the substance of Mr. Bartley's article received at Harper's, we are able to publish comments by three respected Protestants: Dr. Nels F. S. Ferré, Abbot Professor of Christian Theology at the Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts; Professor Huston Smith of the Humanities Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and Reverend William S. Hill of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Wilkensburg, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Ferré, a Congregationalist minister and author of many books on religious questions, happened to attend the same meeting on the shores of Lake Michigan where Mr. Bartley, according to his article, became convinced that his doubts

about traditional faith were shared by many young members of the church. He writes:

William Bartley's "I Call Myself a Protestant" accurately indicates the theological situation in the large part of Protestantism that has discarded the classical Christian faith. Another part is confused and hesitant; still another and larger segment remains pre-critical—it accepts the Bible as a literal statement of the truth. Barth encourages those who keep believing, although unconvinced that faith is reasonable. Tillich helps those who abandon classical Christianity in favor of its symbolic truth. Mr. Bartley dismisses both positions.

That we have to make metaphysical statements he acknowledges, unprovable though they are except in terms of their own requirements. For himself he asks only integrity, love, and strength for living.

Mr. Bartley's hard hitting is honest. One further step, however, would make him more representative of the post-critical Protestants—those who have applied critical methods and Biblical scholarship to traditional Christianity. The real choice is no longer between Barth and Tillich. It is for "the extreme middle" between them.

This position accepts the fact that although we all must have some ultimate, such a presupposition cannot be proved. Thus we all live by faith. We choose the context of our lives. Why, then, should not human beings choose whatever answers most fully their deepest needs in order to live, to know, to be fulfilled? Mr. Bartley admits two such needs of life as central: integrity and love. Are not truth and love at the center of what life needs beyond the physical level? Cannot life be organized and fulfilled around these two centers?

Mr. Bartley stands in awe before the moral genius of Christ, rooted as it was in honesty and love. This same Christ claimed to be the way

to God. As we must have some presupposition for life, can there be a better than Christ's way of integrity and compassion? If choice of ultimates must be made, moreover, what alternative is there that satisfies not only life but knowledge? I have wrestled for years with ultimates without finding a truer. Take, for example, another possible ultimate: evolution as the explanation of existence. The very facts described by the theory of evolution point even more readily to a Creator. That our long history of creation has come to be without Ground and Goal is incredible mystique to the hard-headed thinker.

Even granting a Creator, however, does the stark fact of evil preclude faith in a Creator who is also Love? No easy answer can be given to this question, but perhaps those who accept the harsh reality of the sufferings of Christ, brought on by Love's combat with evil, may find more meaning even in evil than do those who demand a life without suffering. Meaninglessness is theoretical luxury. By living we choose meanings. Believe something we must, for the concrete choices that shape life are faith.

Mr. Bartley is right: faith must be reformulated. Our understanding of God must grow amazingly in the light of our best new knowledge. But can any context of faith take the place of Christ's way of integrity and concern? Mr. Bartley's next step will be costly but count.

Unlike Dr. Ferré, a number of readers criticized Mr. Bartley's treatment of the work of Paul Tillich. Among Dr. Tillich's defenders was Professor Smith of MIT who wrote in part:

Mr. Bartley ignores the layered character of every great historical religion which must meet the need of millions of men and women from every walk of life. Truth perceived by children must be adapted to their mental make-up but Mr. Bartle

seems to assume that the minds of all adults work in the same way. It is not a peculiarity of Mr. Tillich to think otherwise. Indian thought has never hesitated to commend to persons at different levels of understanding different concepts of God, ranging from graven images to the absolutely formless Nirguna Brahman. Western theology has allowed less latitude but it too has accepted the principle.

When an old woman asked St. Thomas whether the names of all the blessed were written on a scroll exhibited in Heaven, he wrote back with untiring calm: "So far as I can see this is not the case; but there is no harm in saying so." Where is the duplicity? To introduce the Grand Inquisitor when the issue is that of layered truth is to confuse rather than to clarify.

A final comment comes, appropriately enough, from Mr. Bartley's own former Rector in the Episcopal Church in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, in which he was once a parishioner before becoming a Quaker. The Rev. William S. Hill writes:

Mr. Bartley speaks only for his own questing spirit. There is, of course, nothing wrong with that. On the contrary, there is much to be gained from reading an intelligent man's honest account of his own spiritual pilgrimage, especially when he has intellectually come to grips with some of the outstanding religious thinkers of our day. However, if anyone were looking for an understanding of Protestantism, he would be hard-pressed to find it in Mr. Bartley's article.

The essence of Protestantism is expressed in the concept that every soul can have immediate and direct access to God. And this idea has been given concrete form in such things as the placing of the Bible in the hands of the laity, in lay representation on church councils, and in the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers." And this has

been bound to encourage the questing spirit, which Mr. Bartley himself represents. And with every person—each with individual limitations and capabilities—on a spiritual pilgrimage of his own, it is not surprising that within Protestantism there should be "primitives," "liberalists," "symbolists," "myth-breakers," and clergymen who have views different from those of members of their congregations. That Protestantism can include the near-fundamentalist Billy Graham (whom Mr. Bartley does not mention) and the myth-breaking Paul Tillich, is an evidence not of weakness, as Mr. Bartley assumes, but of vitality and strength. In a mountain-climbing party every man does not occupy the same foothold at the same time.

Along with the questing spirit which Protestantism encourages, there is at work in Protestantism, as in all organized religion, what can be called a congealing spirit—that is, the impulse to consolidate, to solidify, to impose a measure of uniformity upon a set of ideas or a group of people. At its worst, the congealing spirit chills individual and institution alike into lifeless stone; at its best, it gives them order

and discipline. For all its freedom, Protestantism has from the beginnings sought to achieve sufficient order to make for effectiveness; indeed, it was this consideration alone which led Calvin to establish a "visible" church, with clergy and sacraments. Accordingly, though institutional organization has never been as definite and rigid in Protestantism as in Roman Catholicism, it nevertheless exists. It is, in fact, inescapable; and Mr. Bartley is going to look in vain to find a church without it.

Mr. Bartley should remember that the religious philosophers whom he has studied were without exception possessed of the same questing spirit which animates him, and therefore he must not be too hard on them if their pilgrimage has taken them to places he does not himself find intellectually hospitable. At the same time, he should not be surprised to find the congealing spirit at work in organized religion, even among the Quakers whom he has recently joined; let him be reminded that they objected to the mustache worn by Rufus Jones. And when this occurs, he can with greater accuracy say, "I call myself a Protestant."



"The way I look at it—we go when our number is up, and there's nothing we can do about it."