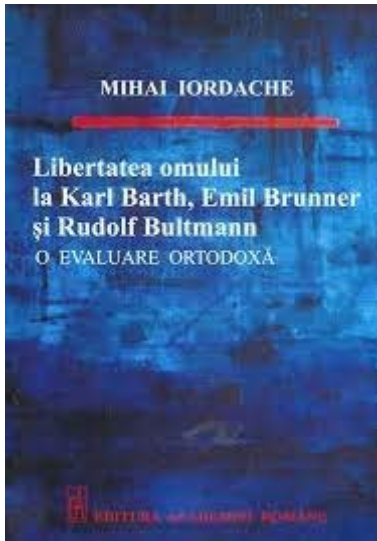


## Petre Maican: Review



**Die Freiheit des Menschen bei Karl Barth, Emil Brunner und Rudolf Bultmann (Libertatea omului la Karl Barth, Emil Brunner și Rudolf Bultmann. O evaluare ortodoxa),** Editura Academiei Romane, 2017, ISBN:978-973-27-2869-7), 387pp.

### **Reviewed by Petre Maican**

This book represents the publication in Romanian of the doctoral thesis defended by



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Rev. Mihai Iordache at the University of Bucharest. Its goal is to provide an Orthodox evaluation of the notion of freedom as it is found in the works of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann (p. 15). The structure of the book follows the classical format: in the first chapter the reader is introduced to the Reformation – the common root from which all three theologians derive their views – then each of them is discussed separately. The chapters are divided in three parts: one providing biographical details, one discussing their anthropology and another their concept of freedom. The Orthodox comments are peppered throughout the chapter and recapitulated at the end.

The first chapter offers a succinct presentation of the context of the Reformation and the notion of freedom in its three foundational figures: Martin Luther, Jean Calvin, and Ulrich Zwingli. Although Iordache does not have the space for a detailed engagement with all of them, he notices quite justly that the main paradigm defining their thinking is that of obedience. The Christian is free only inasmuch as he or she obeys God. The second chapter discusses the conception of freedom in Karl Barth. Iordache points out that Barth assumes the legacy of the Reformation, defends its understanding of freedom as obedience to the Word of God. For the author, this position is incompatible with Orthodox teaching. The biggest difference between the two conceptions being that for the latter, freedom leads the human being to God where it finds fulfilment within one's self-sacrificial love for God (p. 150). According to Iordache, Emil Brunner suffers from the same flaw as Barth; he denies free will and defines freedom only in terms of obedience. Even if Brunner nuances his position by linking obedience with notions such as love and beauty, Iordache is not fully convinced by the resonance of this approach with the Orthodox tradition. For Iordache, freedom and obedience remain irreconcilable (p. 272). The

fourth chapter looks at Rudolf Bultmann's interpretation of freedom and free will. Bultmann has much in common with the other two interlocutors. Like Barth and Brunner, Bultmann connects freedom with responsibility, but for him responsibility extends beyond the ethical, into political and even historical level (pp. 300-302). This view of responsibility is compared with that found in some of Dostoyevsky's writings and evaluated as very close to the Orthodox spirit (303-304). Still, the unbridgeable difference with the Orthodox remains Bultmann's commitment to the red line of the Reformation, namely that the unconditional obedience to God is the sign of the freedom Christians gained through their faith (p. 307, 313). Iordache insists again that for the Orthodox tradition, free will exists before the declaration of their faith in Christ (p. 314).

The book is well documented and well written, the reader even being pleasantly surprised to come across evocative passages such as the description of the city of Basel in the second chapter. In addition to its stylistic virtues, the book is to be commended for introducing the Romanian Orthodox reader to the lives and works of some of the most important Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. If echoes of Barth are to be found in the writings of Father Dumitru Stăniloae and even in some recent PhD theses, this is not the case with Brunner and Bultmann, whose reception in Romanian Orthodox theology remains limited.

Moreover, Iordache should also be praised for the nuanced way in which he presents the teaching of the three theologians. This is most evident in the case of Bultmann where he resists the temptation of reducing Bultmann's position to his theory a demythologisation.

To me it seems that the only critique to be raised could be formulated from the perspective of non-Orthodox readers. For

them, the author may appear at times as too passionately apologetic, especially, when he states throughout the book that the Reformers as well as Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann held a mistaken understanding of freedom because they were not well acquainted with the Fathers of the Church. While for an Orthodox such statements could be seen as expressions of a vigorous ecumenical consciousness, some Protestant readers might tend to disagree and consider them patronizing. Nonetheless, this remark should not distract us from the main contribution of the book, the evaluation of the notion of freedom in the Protestant tradition according to the yardstick of the Orthodox. This is a difficult but much needed task, if the two traditions are to develop an understanding of freedom capable to withstand the increasing pressure of secularisation.