

DE GRUYTER

KARL BARTH'S EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

*Edited by Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler
and Sarah Stewart-Kroeker*

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Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans

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Edited by
Bruce McCormack, Friederike Nüssel
and Christoph Schwöbel †

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Editors' Introduction

Someone is going up the stairs in a church's tower... It is nighttime, completely dark. Losing his balance, that person finds something hanging loose next to him and holds fast onto it. But what he is grasping is in fact the bell rope: he ends up waking the entire town!

This is the image Karl Barth used for his commentary on the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans.¹ What might have been one more book among many others in Christian theology at the time of publication became a major sensation, in the ensuing months, in the world of German-speaking theology and Christianity.

Certainly, Barth wanted his commentary to be read and heard. His long, powerful lecture in Tambach in September 1919 on "The Christian in Society," only half a year after the publication of the commentary, certainly generated the interest of a good number of readers.² But no one, including Barth himself, could have foreseen its widespread and lasting effects.

Why and how did the *Römerbrief* become a classic of Christian theology? And what may this book have to say to us still today, one hundred years after its publication in its first (1919) and second (1922) editions? Various answers can be given to these questions. The present book gathers a few such responses, written by both seasoned and younger scholars, by theologians as well as by historians, philosophers and political thinkers. These essays were presented at an international conference hosted by the Theological Faculty at the University of Geneva (Switzerland) in June 2019.³ One of the key aims of the conference was indeed to place scholars who represent these various disciplines – and do so with great distinction – in conversation with one another. Ethicists were encour-

1 See Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Erster Band: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik* (1927), ed. Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe II.14 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), 7–8: „Blicke ich auf meinen Weg zurück, so komme ich mir vor wie einer, der, in einem dunklen Kirchturm sich treppaufwärts tastend, unvermutet statt des Geländers ein Seil ergriffen, das ein Glockenseil war, und nun zu seinem Schrecken hören musste, wie die grosse Glocke über ihm soeben und nicht nur für ihn bemerkbar angeschlagen hatte“.

2 Karl Barth, "The Christian in Society, 1919," in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 35–69.

3 Only a few papers that were presented in Geneva are not included in the present volume. Among them, we wish to point out Matthias Zeindler's very interesting contribution on Barth's critique of religion, published as: "Diese verblendete Unart. Religionskritische Religion," in Margarete Frettlöh and Matthias Zeindler, *Theologie am Nullpunkt. Karl Barth und die Krise der Kirche* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2022).

aged to confront their approaches with Barth's radical reconfiguration of theological ethics, scholars interested in the greening of theology were invited to reflect upon the Swiss theologian's insights on a key biblical chapter such as Romans 8, experts in political science and political philosophy pondered Barth's views on political themes, and philosophers were invited to locate where, as they see it, Barth's real breakthrough might be found, already in the first edition of the commentary.

This much is clear: Karl Barth effected a number of important developments with his book, which was his first monograph (*many* more would follow until his death in Basel on December 10, 1968).

First, he showed both liberal and conservative theologians that the quest for a genuinely theological interpretation of the New Testament was still both possible and necessary, even for people who have been trained in the modern, historical and critical study of the Bible. It was a well-known fact that many liberal theologians were not at ease with a theological interpretation of the Bible: their focus, in many instances, was mostly directed at the *context* and so at the historical background of the text. Conservative Protestant theologians, for their part, had difficulties paying attention to the lively, unceasing movement of God's word as well as to the human dimension of the text: they tended to tame the text instead of letting it question their dogmatic presuppositions. Barth upset both the liberals and the conservatives with his commentary – but he did not want it any other way! Those who place Barth within the camp of “neo-orthodox” are mistaken. He was never simply interested in bringing back orthodox doctrines: the first aim of any theology must be to listen to the message of the Scriptures. If orthodox doctrines concur with this message, then so much the better. But one cannot *begin* by assuming that these doctrines correspond to the Scriptures: this has to be established through a careful interpretation of the texts. Biblical interpretation needs focus on the “matter” (*Sache*) that is both somehow present in the text and presented by the text: exegesis must be *sachlich*, as Barth put it in one of the prefaces to the first edition.⁴ The historical-critical method was thus not rejected at all (“The historical-critical method in the study of the Bible has its rightful place,” he wrote in the Preface to the first edi-

⁴ For a detailed and insightful analysis of the various prefaces Barth wrote for the two editions of his commentary, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, WUNT 2/145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; also published by Eerdmans in 2004).

tion), but it needed to be complemented by a theological account of the text and an earnest attempt at understanding.⁵

Second, Barth's commentary was arguably the first successful attempt at integrating the recent retrieval of the thoroughly eschatological dimension of the New Testament writings, first initiated by Johannes Weiss in the 1890s' and then by Albert Schweitzer at the turn of the century. In most cases, theologians were either embarrassed by the retrieval of the eschatological nature of Jesus's and Paul's message (not to mention the other New Testament authors), or they were oblivious to it. Not Barth, who made eschatology a crucial piece of his interpretation of Paul's letter to the Romans. Precisely in that regard, the two editions of his commentary would prove to be very influential, into the 1960's and beyond. Rudolf Bultmann found in the second edition of the *Römerbrief* a stance which he deemed consonant with the fourth gospel, on the ultimate (the *eschaton*) and its judgement as encountering time, our time, *at all moments* of (our) present time.⁶ Eschatology is in fact a key distinctive feature not just of the two editions of Barth's commentary – it is arguably the lens through which scholars in recent decades have identified some of the most significant changes between the first edition (1919) and the second (1922).⁷ Whereas the first edition contains what has been termed an "organic" interpretation of eschatology, with the Kingdom growing like a mustard-seed, independently of any human influence, the second edition departs from such a linear, progressive interpretation to stress the strictly vertical nature of the *eschaton* as it encounters time "straight down from above" (*senkrecht von oben*).

Third, even though this was a commentary of a biblical book (debating whether Barth's *Römerbrief* is a "genuine" biblical commentary is a bit of a dead-end, as the answer to that question can only be two-sided), it announced a major renewal of Protestant theology: a theology that would not base itself on human experience, but rather on the transcendent reality that confronts human beings *in* this world without being *of* this world. Even religious experience, a central theme in Protestant theology at the time (see Wilhelm Herrmann's works), was disqualified by Barth. For anyone who had the stamina to read

5 Karl Barth, "Vorwort [1918]," *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 3.

6 See for instance Rudolf Bultmann's Gifford Lectures: *History and Eschatology* (New York: Harper, 1962).

7 See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 141–55 and 245–62. In the eyes of many scholars who study Karl Barth's oeuvre, McCormack's study remains a towering achievement, almost thirty years later.

through Barth's thick book, it was clear that Christian theology had to concern itself – not just marginally but quite centrally – with ancient doctrines such as predestination or divine judgement. And while liberal theology often articulated a more generous or positive view of humanity than the 16th century Reformers as well as a doctrine of God centered on God's goodness at the risk of eclipsing the dimensions of God's righteousness and God's judgment, Barth struck a tone that unmistakably recalled the leading voices of the Protestant Reformation, especially the young Martin Luther.⁸ It is not by chance that Barth turned to Paul's epistle to the Romans in the summer of 1916. This was arguably the key text of Luther's (and later also of Calvin's) Reformation. Turning to this particular epistle meant delving into the very heart of the message of the gospel as Reformatory and Protestant theology understand it, i. e. not as a message that centers on what human beings may or may not do in order to find true life, but instead on what God has done and does in Jesus-Christ to redeem humanity and creation as a whole, and what human beings may or must do in response. In the course of Barth's commentary, Paul's text led him to think deeply about the scope of sin and the even greater power of divine grace, the condemnation of sin by God and the inclusion of all things in God's forgiveness. In the ensuing decades, which were very rich in new developments and new insights, Barth never left behind these themes, which needless to say belong to the very heart of Christian theology. This does not mean Barth did not see some limitations in his commentary: even as he appreciated the vehemence of it all, he was quite sure he had not adequately reflected, especially in the second edition, upon the clarity of God's Yes to creation and to humanity. A host of formulations (“the line of death” or *Todeslinie*, the “judgement of death” or *Todesurteil*, the stark and at times overwhelming emphasis on the “negation”) led readers to misunderstand Barth as a pessimist theologian, as a theologian of God's utter distance from the world!⁹ After all, isn't God “der ganz Andere,” for him – the “wholly other” (*totaliter aliter*)? And isn't the “infinite qualitative distinction” a key aspect of Barth's thought in those years?¹⁰ The certainty that Barth's God was utterly transcendent in

8 See Christine Svinth-Væрге Pöder, “Luther's Lectures on Romans in the Work of Karl Holl, Rudolf Hermann, and Karl Barth,” in Heinrich Assel and Bruce McCormack, ed., *Luther, Barth, and Movements of Theological Renewal (1918 – 1933)*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 188 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 57–73.

9 See Bernhard Dörries, *Der ferne und der nahe Gott. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Theologie Karl Barths* (Gotha: Klotz, 1927).

10 “[...] if I have a ‘system’, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: ‘God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.’ The relation be-

the sense of a distant and even absent God would, quite unfortunately, become part and parcel of the *communis opinio* concerning his theology. His entire theology was described, quite rightly, as a “theology of crisis” or (better) of *Krisis*, a term that certainly carries *negative* overtones in most people’s minds, when in fact Barth meant by it a judging that is in itself a source of hope, a promise...¹¹ Barth’s sense of a hope that is located in the midst of crisis may, despite the pessimistic readings it has occasioned, in fact be part of the *Römerbrief*’s enduring significance.

The present book contains seven parts, presenting Barth as a scriptural theologian (I), hermeneutics and metaphysics (II), the historical context (III), the first edition of the *Römerbrief* (IV), the themes faith and resurrection (V), ethics and politics (VI) and, finally, religion, liturgy and theology (VII).

We refer readers to the abstracts (found at the beginning of each contribution) for a closer look at the contents of the book.

Organizing a conference of this amplitude and publishing the proceedings requires finding significant support from various institutions. For generous subsidies, we wish to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF/FNS), the *Schweizerische Akademie der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften* (SAGW), the *Schweizerische theologische Gesellschaft* (SThG), the *Société académique de Genève* (SACAD), the *Fonds général* of the University of Geneva, as well as the *Société des Amis de la Faculté de théologie de l’Université de Genève* (SAFT). We also thank the many students and assistants who helped run the conference. We are deeply grateful to the staff of W. de Gruyter, especially Albrecht Döhnert and Eva Frantz, for welcoming this book and for their very competent and friendly guidance throughout the publishing process. Elio Jaillet generously helped in the revision of the proofs and the preparation of the index. Last but not least, we would like to thank Cécile Guinand, a theology student at the University of Geneva and holder of a PhD in French literature, for her careful review of all the contributions.

tween *this* God and *this* human being, the relation between *this* human being and *this* God, is to me and at once the theme of the Bible and the sum of philosophy.” Karl Barth, “The Preface to the Second Edition,” in *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 10 (rev.). For the original version, see: Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, ed. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 16–17.

¹¹ For an excellent study of the term *Krisis* and its uses in Barth’s early theology, see Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der ‘dialektischen Theologie’ Karl Barths. Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der ‘Kirchlichen Dogmatik’* (Munich: Kaiser, 1987).

Does Karl Barth's theology have a future? Without encouraging uncritical or nostalgic readings of the Swiss theologian (he himself did not wish to have this kind of "disciples," had little interest in parrots except for the avian kind, and famously did not count himself a "Barthian"!), this volume points decidedly in the direction of a *positive* answer to this question.



I Barth as Scriptural Theologian

Beverly Roberts Gaventa

Reading Romans on the Brink: The Continuing Challenge of Barth's *Römerbrief*

Abstract: In the preface to the second edition of Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*, he observes that most treatments of Paul are "harmless," failing to do justice to the fact that Paulinism always stands "on the brink of heresy." It is this insight of Barth's that provoked the ire of the exegetical establishment. His treatment of Romans 9–11 offers a prime example of the strengths and the dangers of Barth's approach.

1 Introduction

Karl Barth spent just over two years writing the 438 pages of the first edition of his commentary on Romans, yet he spent four months drafting and re-drafting the preface, which scarcely exceeds a single page.¹ In that preface, Barth declares his presuppositions in elliptical, almost impenetrable, fashion. He announces his concern to hear Paul's voice in and for the present. He stipulates that he regards the search for the historical Paul as important but merely preliminary to the quest to grapple with the "mighty voice of Paul."² He closes by remarking on his own joy in this labor and inviting others to join in the discussion.

The discussion was indeed joined, although not in the fashion Barth imagined, since the discussion focused more on Barth's exegetical approach than on the voice of Paul in the present.³ Among the early critics was Adolf Jülicher of Marburg, whose lengthy remarks bear reviewing, both because Jülicher was a

1 See the discussion of the development of that preface, together with drafts of the preface, in Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 14–15, 265–92.

2 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwin C. Hoskyns, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; 1968), 2.

3 In fairness to Barth's readers, understanding the preface to the first edition almost requires reading the entirety of the commentary, since it reflects what Barth has learned in the process of writing and does little to set the table for readers who take up the volume for the first time. Note Burnett's comment that Barth's decision to attach only a brief preface seems "unfortunate" as it left most readers not knowing what to make of the book. Burnett, *Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 15.

highly respected New Testament scholar and because his criticism anticipates much of the criticism that has followed.

Jülicher begins by suggesting that Barth perhaps understands himself to be writing for lay people. Much in the book edifies; at points it even approaches “a work of art.” Yet Jülicher acknowledges that Barth does not intend to write what Jülicher condescendingly terms “practical” exegesis. At this point, the veneer of civility disappears and the list of complaints explodes: Barth does not consider scholarly judgments other than his own, his text critical decisions are often idiosyncratic, he takes the Greek *pistis* as faithfulness rather than faith, he identifies “Israel” in chapters 9–11 with the church, and he neglects history altogether. Indeed, Jülicher finds Barth to be a “deadly foe of [...] system, philosophy, or theory” and a denier of history, a despiser of the past. Along the way, Jülicher identifies Barth as a Gnostic, a Marcionite, and a pneumatic.⁴ These accusations appeared in other reviews as well, where Barth gains other “titles”: Biblicist, spiritualist, Neo-Paulinist, enthusiast, dogmatist, and antinomian.⁵ Undeterred, perhaps even provoked by such responses, Barth issued the radically revised second edition of his commentary, together with a new and much lengthier preface. Here he does not back away so much as an inch from his earlier comments about biblical interpretation, but he does unpack them. He begins by commenting on the substantive differences between the first and second editions before turning to his understanding of his task. By contrast with standard commentaries that content themselves with disjointed remarks about single words or phrases, he intends to press on – to be more rather than less critical – to engage the subject matter. Since the subject matter of Romans is God, and since “Paul knows of God what most of us do not know,”⁶ the goal of the commentator should be to address the letter’s understanding of God in all its complexity. Following these extended remarks about his approach to the task of commentary, Barth turns briefly to Romans itself before concluding with a few acknowledgments.

Neither the new preface nor the revised commentary puts the controversy to rest. As Richard Burnett concludes, “Karl Barth has never really been acquitted of the charges made against him by the reviewers of Rom I” (the first edition of

⁴ Jülicher’s review originally appeared in *Die Christliche Welt* 34, no. 29 (1920): 453–7. Citations of it are taken from the English translation, available as “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology Vol. 1*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox, 1968), 72–81. On Jülicher’s life and work, see William Baird, *History of New Testament Research. Volume Two: From Jonathan Edwards to Rudolf Bultmann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 156–62.

⁵ Burnett, *Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 15–18.

⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 11.

the Romans commentary).⁷ Among biblical scholars at least, there lingers the notion that the book is not a commentary at all. Even Charles E.B. Cranfield, whose commentary on Romans engages with Barth regularly, expresses strong reservations. He writes that the volume “has very serious deficiencies as an exposition of Romans, and to take it for one’s main aid in studying the epistle would be to demonstrate one’s failure to learn from Barth’s maturer thinking and one’s lack of an essential element in theological seriousness, a sense of humour.”⁸ The reasons for these responses are clear enough. Barth provides no historical introduction to the letter, he neglects philological details, his forays into text criticism are few and far between. One reason for reviewing Jülicher’s critique is precisely to confirm Burnett’s observation that the questions have changed little over the last century.

Bruce M. McCormack has written that Barth began his work on the commentary by listening “to the results of the best historical work available,” but that work remained “behind the scenes” in the book itself.⁹ A close examination of the commentary reveals that Barth had done extensive reading of his predecessors; what he did not do was display that reading or engage the commentators themselves, since his interest lay with the content of Romans rather than with the commentary tradition.

2 Paulinism on the Brink

Yet I contend that the offense given by the commentary is larger than this failure – or stubborn unwillingness – to display his homework.¹⁰ Late in the preface to

⁷ Burnett, *Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, 23.

⁸ Charles E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), vol. 1, 1:42. See, however, John Webster’s defense of the *Römerbrief* as commentary in “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 205–23. I agree with Webster. The assumptions of my own guild about what makes for a commentary have been constricted and constricting; happily, recent decades have witnessed a proliferation of approaches to commentary writing, resulting in a more capacious understanding of the genre.

⁹ Bruce M. McCormack, “Historical Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis of the New Testament,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on His Sixtieth Birthday*, eds. Mark S. Burrows and Paul Rorem (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 322–38, 329.

¹⁰ The opening paragraphs in this section repeat points made in my “The Finality of the Gospel: Barth’s *Römerbrief* on Romans 9–11,” in *The Finality of the Gospel: Karl Barth and the Tasks*

the second edition, when Barth has turned from a defense of his method to the text of Romans itself, he writes: “Paulinism has stood always on the brink of heresy. This being so, it is strange how utterly harmless and unexceptionable most commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans and most books about Paul are.”¹¹

Barth does not stipulate which heresies he has in mind, nor does he itemize those commentaries he regards as harmless. He does briefly take up the claim of Paul Wernle that there are elements in Romans that belong to the past and should remain there, including Paul’s discussion of Adam and Christ, his use of the Old Testament, and double predestination.¹² In Barth’s view, the commentator is not permitted to set aside such elements because they cause discomfort. Barth does not name Jülicher at this point, although his comment about books on Paul being “harmless” applies also to Jülicher’s review. For example, as Jülicher critiques Barth’s rendering of *pistis*, he surveys numerous places in Romans where the translation of *pistis* as “faithfulness” is forced, where Barth inserts “of God” in order to make the rendering work. That is all well and good. But Jülicher goes on to insist that Barth’s treatment of *pistis* as God’s faithfulness has “destroyed the grandiose thought of Paul, who proclaims the unlimited autonomy of the conscience of the believer.”¹³ Here Jülicher has ceased to be the scientific exegete he claims to be and has cut Paul’s thought down to his own size: his logic appears to be that Paul must believe in human autonomy because Jülicher himself does so.

In the century since the publication of Barth’s commentary, his observations about the interpretation of Scripture have been widely praised, and they have been widely condemned. His hermeneutic continues to attract attention. Yet the lines quoted above have – to the best of my knowledge – largely escaped sustained attention. I want to propose that the real scandal, the real provocation, of Barth’s commentary is connected to this statement, this claim that Paul is always on the brink, that most books about Paul are harmless, unexceptionable. The problem for many readers is not simply that Barth did not play by the rules of

of *Eschatology*, eds. Philip Ziegler and Kaitlyn Dugan, *Studies in Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming). I am grateful to the editors of both volumes for permitting this duplication.

11 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 13. A similar concern appears in Barth’s discussion of Rom 8:3, 277–78: “Do we desire a test as to whether we have spoken rightly of the mission of the Son? Well, if we have not mightily offended every possible human method of investigation, and offended it at its most particularly tender spot, then assuredly we have spoken about – something else.”

12 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 11–12.

13 Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” 77.

the exegetical establishment; the problem is that he drew attention to the content and implications of Romans in ways that were and are deeply disturbing.

Barth does follow Paul to the brink, pursuing the letter to its extreme conclusions, displaying what we might term his exegetical brinkmanship. Barth's exegetical brinkmanship begins early. The letter opens with a reference first to Christ Jesus (v. 1) and then to Jesus Christ (v. 4, 7), an inversion of words that usually prompts commentators to anxiety.¹⁴ Barth has nothing to say about this detail, nor about the question whether *Christos* was a proper name.¹⁵ Instead, he declares that "this" (that is, "Jesus Christ our Lord") "is the Gospel and the meaning of history." Here he introduces his notion that Jesus' name marks the intersection of "the known plane" by the "unknown – the world of the Father, of the Primal Creation, of the final Redemption." Although this revelation took place in the early years of the first century C.E., "the particularity" of those years "is dissolved," because every era is "a potential field of revelation and disclosure."¹⁶ We are light years removed here from analysis of the origins and implications of the term *Christos*, having leapt over the brink of genre expectations and into the substance of the gospel itself.

Another instance of Barth's brinkmanship comes in his discussion of the Adam-Christ parallel in the second half of Rom 5. Paul's complex comparison and contrast between the sin of Adam and the obedience of Christ relies on an assumption that all of humanity is caught up in the action of Adam, so all of humanity is also caught up in the action of Christ. Yet commentators often downplay the universal implications of Paul's argument.¹⁷ The new life Paul speaks of is only for those who believe. Barth, however, once again stands at the brink; he writes of 5:19, "In the light of [Christ's] act of obedience there is no man who is not – in Christ. All are renewed and clothed with righteousness, all are become a new subject, and are therefore set at liberty and placed under

14 Among Barth's near contemporaries, William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1904), 5; Hans Lietzmann, *An die Römer*, 4th ed., NHT 8 (Tübingen: J.C.B Mohr, 1933), 23.

15 By this time, Wilhelm Bousset had already published an argument that Paul understood *Christos* as a proper name rather than a title, so discussion of the question was presumably current as Barth wrote. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: Geschichte des Christusglaubens von den Anfängen des Christentums bis Irenaeus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913). On the emergence of this debate, see Matthew V. Novenson, *Christ Among the Messiahs: Christ Language in Paul and Messiah Language in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12–33.

16 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 29.

17 E.g. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 342–44. For further discussion see Richard Bell, "Rom. 5.18–19 and Universal Salvation," *NTS* 48 (2002): 417–32.

the affirmation of God.”¹⁸ To be sure, Barth goes on to say that this is a matter of hope, of standing “at the threshold,” but he makes no distinction between those who believe Jesus to be the Christ of God and those who do not.

Barth’s brinkmanship is especially pertinent when he comes to Rom 14, where Paul addresses a conflict largely concerning food laws. According to Paul, there are those who believe that Christians must abide by kosher law, while others are convinced that the Christ event has freed them from any such obligation. Scholars typically debate whether this chapter reflects an actual problem at Rome or whether it is more theoretical than specific. As early as Origen, readers of Paul speculate on the ethnic identities of the parties to the dispute, how it originated, and what its significance is for the rest of the letter.¹⁹ Barth says not a word of this (hiding his homework), but he goes further. He declares that Rom 14 is “a warning to all who find themselves in entire agreement with what has been said and are persuaded that their own opinions have been fully confirmed.”²⁰ They are the ones who are in danger of destroying others.

In all these instances, Barth declines to engage in the routine acts tradition associates with commentary writing, acts that often result in a form of taming the text. To understand the literary forms, to comment on parallels with other texts, to explain the historical context, is to have a handle on the text. It is to contain the text.²¹ But Barth’s reading is one of anti-containment. If this commentary trashed the playground of the theologians, it is because that is how Barth reads the letter.

18 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 182.

19 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 9.35; *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series graeca*. 161 vols, ed. Jacques Paul Migne (Paris: 1844–64), 14:1234–47. On Romans 14 and Barth’s interpretation, see Gaventa, “Reading for the Subject: The Paradox of Power in Romans 14:1–15:6,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5, no. 1 (2011): 1–12.

20 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 502.

21 This is not intended as a wholesale rejection of the work of historical criticism. It matters a great deal that the greetings of Romans 16 single out a number of women who are in leadership positions and that many of the names of the people greeted are names associated with slaves. These details give, or they should give, our hearing of the letter a certain specificity that is lost if the letter is read as a general treatise. Nonetheless, there is also a danger in this quest for the historical setting, not only because it is highly susceptible to error (as Barth reminded his critics; see *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6) but also because it can buffer the impact of the letter. If Romans was written merely to seek support for Paul’s planned mission to Spain or only to unite Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome, then its radical claims about the human situation will likely be muted.

3 Romans 9–11 on the Brink

The place where this strategy of anti-containment profoundly disturbs most readers is Barth's treatment of Israel in Rom 9–11.²² Here Barth's interpretation not only stands on the brink of heresy, perhaps it falls into the abyss. Indeed, here a number of even otherwise sympathetic readers would claim that Barth's interpretation is liable to the charge of supersessionism.

By way of reminder: Romans 9–11 takes up explicitly the relationship between God and Israel. Paul's long exploration of the effects of the Christ event culminates in chapter 8 with the claim that the whole of creation waits together, longs together, for God's redemption. The final lines of chapter 8 call out enemies of God's people who might attempt to separate them from God, promising in extravagant language that nothing will separate "us" from God's love in Christ Jesus. Then Rom 9–11 turns to consider a possible separation, a separation between God and Israel. Israel has, as Paul puts it, "tripped over the stone of stumbling,"²³ a stone put in place by God (9:32–33). That "stone of stumbling" is none other than Jesus himself (10:9–13); Israel (or some portion of Israel) does not recognize Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's Messiah. The question, then, is what does this stumbling mean for Israel? And what does it mean for God?

Paul's treatment of this challenge begins with a short and rather strange recital of the history of God with Israel (9:6–29), in which the emphasis lies entirely on God's creative and sustaining work. The central section, chapter 10, unpacks the irony: Israel has pursued righteousness, run after it, but lost the race. Gentiles never entered the race, but they have nevertheless arrived at righteousness. Here Paul writes of Israel as a single entity, ultimately leading to the characterization of Israel as disobedient, rejecting of God's embrace. The final section (chapter 11) opens with the provocative question: does Israel's stumble mean that God has abandoned Israel? Paul rejects the question out of hand. At present Israel is divided, but that division serves to make a place for Gentile inclusion, and the outcome will be, as 11:26 announces the mystery: all Israel will be saved.

That brief and necessarily inadequate summary of Rom 9–11 serves at least to demonstrate how extraordinary it is to open Barth's commentary at Rom 9 and find this: "And now, in contrast with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, there is thrust upon our attention – Israel, *the Church*, the world of religion as it appears in his-

²² This discussion of Barth's treatment of Romans 9–11 duplicates the treatment of that passage in Gaventa, "The Finality of the Gospel: Barth's *Römerbrief* on Romans 9–11."

²³ Translations of Romans are my own.

tory.”²⁴ A few lines further: “*The Church* confronts the Gospel as the last human possibility confronts the impossible possibility of God.”²⁵

Consistently throughout this long section, Barth writes of the church where Paul writes of Israel. He does not identify some segment of Israel as belonging within the church. Nor does he claim that the church is a spiritual version of Israel. He does not explain this move at all, beyond the connection I quoted: “Israel, the Church, the world of religion [...]”²⁶

This move is made more extraordinary by the fact that nowhere in Rom 9–11 does Paul refer explicitly to “the church.” The term *ekklēsia* only appears in Romans in the closing lines of the letter, as he greets “the church” or the “gathering” in various houses (16:1, 4–5, 16).²⁷

As I noted earlier, Barth’s extraordinary move was sharply criticized by Adolf Jülicher, but Jülicher’s critique runs directly counter to contemporary discussion. Jülicher rejects the identification of the church with Israel because it implies criticism of the church. To Jülicher, speaking of the church where Paul spoke of Israel is a problem because it identifies Israel’s failings as those of the church, and Barth’s exegesis thereby taints the church. Jülicher complains that this move shows not “even a limited respect for what the gospel has accomplished.” Barth’s critique of the church emerges again in the final lines of the review, where Jülicher characterizes Barth as despising the past and confidently announces that “‘the church,’ Christendom, religion will not perish.”²⁸

Such criticism of the first edition of the commentary evidently did not dissuade Barth. The second edition reinforces this stunning exegetical move by introducing headings for chapters 9–11 that identify the subject matter as the church. For example, the heading of chapter 9 in the first edition is simply “*Eine Not*”; but in the second edition the heading of chapter 9 is “*Die Not der*

24 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 332, emphasis added.

25 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 332, emphasis added.

26 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 332. Wesley A. Hill associates this move with the “classically Protestant” tradition of taking “the Jew” in Romans to be symbolic of a religious person, see “The Church as Israel and Israel as the Church: An Examination of Karl Barth’s Exegesis of Romans 9:1–5,” in *The Epistle to the Romans and Church Dogmatics 2/2*, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012), 139–58, 146. In a similar vein, Philip Ziegler (in correspondence) recalls Calvin’s practice of reading “Church” for “Israel” in the interpretation of the Old Testament. Yet neither Luther nor Calvin identified Israel with the church in Romans 9–11.

27 Reasons for this omission have been proposed, including the possibility that Paul does not regard the community in Rome as a genuine church because it was not founded by an apostle, see Günter Klein, “Paul’s Purpose in Writing the Epistle to the Romans,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl Paul Donfried, 2nd ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 29–43.

28 Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” 80–81.

Kirche." Similarly, chapter 10 becomes "*Die Schuld der Kirche,*" rather than "*Eine Schuld,*" and chapter 11 is "*Die Hoffnung der Kirche,*" rather than "*Eine Hoffnung.*"

In our time, of course, the criticism of Barth's exegetical move runs in the opposite direction from that of Jülicher. Where he bristled at Barth's criticism of the church, contemporary interpreters reject the erasure of Israel from the text of Paul's letter. Such a substitution is highly provocative, the more so in light of the devastation of the Jewish population in World War II and the subsequent crisis for Christian theology. The anti-Semitism that today rears its vicious head across the globe reinforces the risks involved in Barth's reading. At the very least it is ahistorical, it threatens the particularity of the letter, and it invites the accusation of supersessionism.

Before we take our scissors to that section of the *Römerbrief*, however, there are some things to notice.²⁹ In a period when Rom 9–11 was still largely being treated as an aside or an afterthought, Barth gave it thorough attention as an integral part of the letter. By contrast, the commentary of William Sanday and Arthur Headlam introduces Rom 9–11 with the assertion that "Paul has now finished his main argument."³⁰ Hans Lietzmann's handbook to Romans identifies this section of the letter as a "practical" problem Paul must address.³¹ Not only does Barth treat the passage seriously but he gives it attention proportional to his treatment of the rest of the letter.³²

In addition to taking Rom 9–11 seriously as integral to the letter, there are points where Barth shows independent insight. One example will have to suffice, namely, Barth's comments about Paul's brief reference to Pharaoh. In 9:17–18, having recalled God's unilateral action of bringing about Israel's existence through the birth of Isaac and the choice of Jacob over Esau, prior even to the twins' birth, Paul introduces Pharaoh. Paul writes: "Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this reason I raised you up, that in you I might demonstrate my power and in order that my name might be known in all the earth.' Therefore, God has mercy on whom he wills mercy, just as he hardens the one whom he wills to harden" (9:17–18). Paul here plays on the Exodus account, but in the rest of

²⁹ Barth had several occasions for returning to Romans 9–11, but space precludes consideration of his later exegesis.

³⁰ Sanday, Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, 225.

³¹ Lietzmann, *An die Römer*, 89.

³² In fact, Barth's treatment of the various parts of letter is remarkably even-handed, at least in terms of length of treatment. It is only with chapter 16 that Barth dramatically shortens his comments, relegating the study of the individuals greeted there to the "antiquarian" interests of Lietzmann and Zahn (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 535).

biblical tradition, we find assertions that God hardened Pharaoh's heart and also that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod 8:28; 9:34; 13:15; and see 1 Sam 6:6). Interpreters both Jewish and Christian reinforce the notion of Pharaoh's guilt. Even Augustine and Luther, significant conversation partners for Barth, share this concern to protect God's reputation by making Pharaoh responsible.³³ Barth, by contrast, and rightly in my view, remains close to the text. He writes that by "Predestinating Pharaoh to hardening, God pays no attention to his human qualifications. Moses has no human pre-eminence over Pharaoh. Both stand humanly under the harshness of God; and from this point of view Moses and Pharaoh are interchangeable."³⁴

We may concede these and other strengths in Barth's treatment, but they do not diminish the difficulties inherent in his identification of the church and Israel in this long section of the letter. For some time I have regarded this move on Barth's part as one of authorial cunning, designed precisely to shock the reader. He wrote for an audience largely if not entirely Christian or at least historically related to Christian tradition, and most readers of the commentary over the last century have presumably also been Christian.³⁵ Few of those readers will have been unaware, at least in a general sense, that the topic of Rom 9–11 is the relationship between God and Israel.

Most of Barth's readers, then, come with a sense of Rom 9–11. They – we – begin Rom 9 aligned with the gospel and looking out at Israel. The preposition is deliberate and important: we look *at* Israel. We take the pathos of the early lines of Rom 9 to reflect the fact that Paul himself is not only *en Christō*, located in the body of Christ. Paul is also part of Israel, as he insists in 9:3 and reiterates in 11:1. Romans 9 finds Paul occupying two places at once. As Paul stands with the gospel, as *doulos Christou*, he looks at his kinfolk Israel with longing, and Israel is "the problem." A contemporary variation on this interpretation has it that the problem is God; the question is whether God is faithful. Yet on that reading Paul is still looking from the position of the church (with the gospel) toward God's dealings with Israel, and Israel is the "other."

³³ Here I rely on the research of Claire Mathews McGinnis, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012): 43–64.

³⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 352.

³⁵ In a pointed reaction to Barth's unstated assumption about his audience, Daniel Boyarin writes, "I do not want to be included in Barth's 'us', and find his readings consistently excluding [...]," "Epilogue: Israel Reading in 'Reading Israel,'" in *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations*, ed. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte, *Romans through History and Culture* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000), 248.

For readers steeped in that understanding of Rom 9–11, encountering Barth's treatment is stunning. When readers who are aligned with the church see "church" rather than "Israel," they may for the first time sense the depth of Paul's grief. More than pathos is involved, however. The reader is now reading about herself, her church, her faithlessness, rather than that of someone else. Any criticism of Israel now falls on the church. In this way Barth's exegesis forces a reckoning with any and all forms of Christian arrogance (more on this later).³⁶ Judging by Jülicher's response, this may well be what so provoked him in Barth's exegesis of Rom 9–11. Jülicher may have found much in Barth's treatment of 1–8 that was problematic, but it is with the critique of the *church* that his seething disappointment bursts into flame.

Attributing Barth's highly unusual interpretation to pastoral ingenuity³⁷ is a defensible way to account for Barth's move. Ironically, it also replays an element in Jülicher's review, since Jülicher condescendingly asserts that Barth is writing practical theology. What Jülicher's critique misses, of course, is that Barth's practical theology conforms his commentary to the genre of the letter.³⁸ Proposals for the purpose of Romans proliferate, but on most readings this is a pastoral letter in that it announces the gospel for particular communities at Rome. In addition, Barth's move resembles the rhetorical sleights of hand in the letter itself (as at 2:1; 3:19–20; 11:13), all of which have pastoral aims.³⁹

4 Barth's Qualitative Distinction

There is more to be said, however. Barth's treatment of Rom 9–11 is not simply a clever rhetorical move intended to catch Christian readers in their arrogance. It is inevitable, given his reading of Rom 1–8; he could not proceed with a conventional reading in which Israel is treated as the "problem" in chapters 9–11.

³⁶ David Demson's proposed recasting of Barth's treatment of Romans 9–11 in the *Dogmatics* runs along similar lines, "Israel as the Paradigm of Divine Judgment: An Examination of a Theme in the Theology of Karl Barth," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26, no. 4 (1989): 611–27.

³⁷ Similarly, Wesley A. Hill perceives the homiletical impact of Barth's exegesis at this point in "The Church as Israel and Israel as the Church," 145.

³⁸ I am grateful to Jonathan Linebaugh for this observation.

³⁹ See Gaventa, "From Toxic Speech to the Redemption of Doxology in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays*, eds. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 392–408.

Crucial to Barth's commentary, as is well known, is the conviction of an absolute difference between God and humanity. As early as his discussion of 1:16, he invokes the "qualitative distinction between God and man and God and the world."⁴⁰ On Paul's announcement of the gospel as God's salvation, Barth writes that "we are farther from God [...] than we have ever dreamed."⁴¹ Human unrighteousness stems from the human presumption to know what it means to say "God": "We assign to Him the highest place in our world: and in so doing we place Him fundamentally on one line with ourselves and with things."⁴² But God is "in every manner wholly distinct."⁴³

That conviction, which places humans on one side of a line and God on the other, could cohere with a reading of the letter that distinguishes between people groups. From the opening lines of the letter, Paul speaks of "Greeks and barbarians," "Jew and Greek," "circumcised and uncircumcised." He distinguishes remaining in sin from being baptized into Christ. Late in the letter he will acknowledge that there are those who continue to observe kosher law and those who believe they are free to eat anything. Barth's reading of the letter, however, constantly undermines these differences. Humanity is united as one in the presence of God who is the only Other.

Of particular note is Barth's concern to locate religious people firmly on the human side of the vast difference that separates God from humanity. In a dramatic paragraph introducing his treatment of Rom 2, Barth asks to whom the wrath of God is revealed. A series of questions parades the possibility that there are humans who are exempt, that there are certain people or certain historical contexts that remain innocent of God's judgment.⁴⁴ In response, when Barth takes up Paul's charge that "You are without excuse," he writes that even those who know God, also "belong to the world of time. There is no human righteousness by which men can escape the wrath of God!" No one is exempt. There are "no saints in the midst of a company of sinners."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 39.

⁴¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 37.

⁴² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 44.

⁴³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 115.

⁴⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 55.

⁴⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 56–57. In a similar vein, writing about Romans 7, Paul W. Meyer observes that the whole of Romans is "but a single massive argument of the conventional uses of" a distinction between "the godly" and "the ungodly," in "The Worm at the Core of the Apple: Exegetical Reflections on Romans 7," in *The Word in this World: Essays in New Testament Exegesis and Theology*, ed. John T. Carroll (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 57–77, 65.

On Barth's reading, Abraham himself is not an exception to this human unity. Abraham's faith is a miracle, not an act of his own volition.⁴⁶ When he comes to Paul's introduction of election at the end of chapter 8, the first thing Barth does is to reject any attempt to divide humanity into elect and non-elect: "[W]e are forbidden to give a quantitative answer to this question."⁴⁷

Of particular note, Barth delights in placing Christian theologians themselves squarely with the rest of humanity on the all-too-human side of the line, remote from God. Those devoted to God's law become sinners, including "the clergy and their friends," "the doctors of the Theological Faculty," "those active in Social Reform," and those who publish "books such as the one I am now writing."⁴⁸ "The fatal prattle of systematic theology," while inescapable, itself witnesses to the divine truth.⁴⁹

Having written in this way through Rom 1–8, it should not be surprising that, as he turns to 9:1, Barth writes, "There is no opportunity given us whereby we are in the right and others in the wrong, for God's point of view is strictly protected against every human point of view: He is righteous, and we are all unrighteous."⁵⁰ Isolating Israel as distinctive in its resistance to the gospel would undermine this central element in Barth's understanding of the letter.

When he comes to Rom 9–11, then, Barth cannot suddenly read Paul as judging one human group among others.

5 Barth and Paul on the Brink

Not only is Barth's radical move consistent with his own argument throughout the book, but at a deep level it is coherent with the letter Paul wrote. Time and again in the letter Paul appears to draw lines between human groups only to erase them or undermine them. At the outset of the letter, he writes that the gospel's power is for "Jew first and also the Greek," both introducing ethnic difference and prioritizing Jews. That difference seems to be underscored in the second half of the first chapter, as Paul parades conventional Jewish stereotypes about the idolatry and sexual immorality of Gentiles by way of announcing that God's wrath on human disobedience is being revealed, being apoca-

⁴⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 119–22.

⁴⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 321.

⁴⁸ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 174.

⁴⁹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 333. Barth also analogizes theologians and philosophers to "boils and ulcers which enable the disease from which all suffer to be diagnosed." (185–86)

⁵⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 334.

lypsed, alongside the gospel. Yet the parading of Gentile sin is followed in 2:1–3:8 by a dense argument that undermines the notion that Jews are in fact removed from the rebellion against God characterizing Gentile life. All, Paul concludes in 3:9, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. “There is no difference,” he writes in 3:22–23, “for all sinned and all are thereby deprived of the glory of God.”

By introducing Abraham in Rom 4, Paul might be re-introducing Jewish difference, but it is notable that he identifies Abraham as the father of the *uncircumcised* before he identifies him as father of the circumcised (4:11–12). The syncretism of Adam and Christ in Rom 5 proceeds without any distinction between Jew and Gentile: all humanity is implicated in Adam’s disobedience, and all humanity is taken up in Christ’s obedience.

More could be said by way of unpacking this point, but this will have to suffice for now. When Barth refuses to distinguish among human beings, placing all of humanity on one side of a line that separates God from humanity, he is in touch with a deep chord that runs through Rom 1–8. Barth may be borrowing the formulation from Kierkegaard, but the conviction is Paul’s.

Further, Barth’s radical reading of Rom 9–11 oddly coheres with some of the major issues in that section. Paul’s concern throughout this long passage is to demonstrate – or to recall for his audience – that God created Israel and will not be separated from what Paul tellingly refers to in 11:1 as “God’s people.” What happens to Israel is, from the beginning, a function of God’s activity. God created Israel, God has caused Israel to stumble, God has divided Israel, God will not vacate the promises to Israel. It is not at all hard to imagine that Paul would make similar claims about the church.

A second major concern in Rom 9–11 is with arrogance, explicitly with the arrogance of Gentile Christians. In 11:13, Paul turns to address the audience, or at least a portion of it: “I am speaking to you Gentiles!” What follows is a clear warning against the assumption that Gentile believers are superior to Jews, perhaps even that they have replaced Jews. The long list of gifts from God to Israel in 9:1–5 may also be designed to undermine Gentile arrogance. When Barth then excoriates religious arrogance, he is again in touch with a deep strand in 9–11 (and elsewhere in Romans, see, for example, 12:3, 16; implicitly also 14:1–15:6).

Here if anywhere in the commentary, we see that Barth has taken seriously his own claim that Paulinism always “stood on the brink of heresy.” The move to read “Israel” and write “church” is virtually heretical.⁵¹ It sets aside the plain

51 Space does not allow me to address the charge that Barth’s reading – or Paul’s text – is su-

sense of the words on the page, to say nothing of Paul's historical context. Nonetheless this move is in touch with deep currents in the letter, as the letter repeatedly asserts the "nondivisive difference" between Jew and Gentile.⁵² The letter celebrates God's action for those who are called, both Jew and Gentile, but it also warns against any claim to preferential status. "Religion," to use Barth's category, is at its worst when it promotes its own status. Barth's reading of "church" for "Israel" runs the risk of denying the specificity of the text historically (in the past) in order to make it more specific historically (in the present).

6 Conclusion

In Rom 9–11, Paul writes about God's dealings with Israel, by which he means a particular historic people. Although the letter addresses assemblies of Christians in Rome, in Rom 9–11 he is not writing about God's dealings with the church itself. In this sense, Barth's treatment of Rom 9–11 is wrong on historical grounds.

Nevertheless, this radical misreading does reflect major issues in Paul's letter. For Paul, the event of the gospel discloses that all of humanity, without exception, is captive to the powers of sin and its toxic partner, death. For Paul, one implication of that disclosure is the exclusion of any and all forms of human arrogance. If all humanity was in Adam and all humanity is now in Christ, no human may make a claim of any sort in God's presence.

This is a deeply uncomfortable conclusion to propose in the year 2019, particularly as a privileged white American. It runs the risk of being heard as a plea for sameness, a plea to suppress difference in any and all forms. That is not my intent, and I think such a plea trips over both Paul's argument and Barth's reading of it. For Paul, humanity's commonality is a commonality in captivity to sin and death which is made visible only by a commonality in redemption through

persessionistic. To be sure, if Barth is understood to be deliberately effacing Israel from Romans, then the charge has merit. If, however, as I have argued, Barth is displaying the shared status of all humanity before God, then a supersessionistic reading actually turns the text on its head. ⁵² The phrase "nondivisive difference" comes from Susannah Ticciati, "The Nondivisive Difference of Election: A Reading of Romans 9–11," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (2012): 257–78.

God's action in Jesus Christ. That commonality does not produce uniformity in human life.⁵³

As for Barth's *Römerbrief* at the century mark, perhaps we honor it best by considering what forms of arrogance he would target at present. I suspect – or perhaps I hope – that his concern for religious arrogance would expand to encompass concern about national, racial, ethnic, and gender arrogance. I leave that question for our reflection.

53 So Ernst Käsemann: "For Paul, unity in the body of Christ does not mean the sameness of all the members [...] God does not want stereotypes," "On Paul's Anthropology," in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 1–31, 3–4.

John M.G. Barclay

“For I am Not Ashamed of the Gospel”: Commentary as Interpretation in the *Römerbrief*

Abstract: Barth’s claim that his *Römerbrief* is an explication of Paul’s letter to the Romans has been contested from the start and is often ignored in theological analysis of this work. By attending to Barth’s intention to *understand* the subject-matter of the text, we can appreciate his desire to speak not *about* Paul, but *with* him. Romans 1:16 provides an illuminating example: in contrast to the fascination of historical critics in what lies behind the text, Barth explores what it means that the good news is “the power of God” – giving unusual attention to the meaning of “God.” Barth thus continues to provoke the discipline of biblical studies, urging it to venture beyond its historicist limits and secular parameters and to engage fully with the theological subject-matter of Romans. Theological *Sachexegese* emerges not as a betrayal of biblical studies, but as its fullest form.

1 Introduction

Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* is significant at so many levels – for the history of theology and for theological hermeneutics – that it is easy to forget that it is, first and foremost, a commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans. As a biblical scholar, this is what intrigues me most about this text: in what sense *is* it a commentary on the text of Paul’s letter, and what could biblical studies still learn from the *Römerbrief* about how to read this or any other biblical text?

As is well known, Barth claimed:

my sole aim was to interpret Scripture [...] in writing this book I felt myself bound to the actual words of the text, and did not in any way propose to engage myself in free theologizing [...] My book deals with one issue, and with one issue only. Did Paul think and speak in general and in detail in the manner in which I have interpreted him as thinking and speaking? Or did he think and speak altogether differently?¹

1 Author’s preface to the English translation, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns from the 6th edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), ix–x.

Certainly, in its form this book tracks the sequence of the Greek text of the letter to the Romans, freshly translated by Barth; it proceeds section by section and phrase by phrase, and it refers constantly to the precise terminology of the text. Strangely enough, this core characteristic of the *Römerbrief* as commentary or elucidation of a very particular text has received rather little attention, even by Barth's friends. His critics, of course, damned his *Römerbrief* as "free theologizing," with *false* pretences to be a commentary, right from the start. Adolf Jülicher's withering review includes the line that the *Römerbrief* was "less significant for the history of interpretation [...] than for that of Christendom," while the British biblical scholar (and anti-Barthian) James Barr was later to complain that "Barth's *Romans* almost ceases to be a commentary: the earlier stage, the asking what Paul actually thought, often drops out of sight, and what remains is a theological essay planted upon the Pauline text."² But even those who admired the *Römerbrief* and hailed it as a landmark have typically cited it without *any* reference to the Pauline text that Barth is commenting upon, or cite only its prefaces and not the commentary itself. As a result, in subsequent biblical scholarship on Romans Barth's commentary is hardly ever cited, even by those sympathetic to his theology (such as Ernst Käsemann and Charles Cranfield). Indeed, a few years ago, Francis Watson considered that "there are few signs in contemporary biblical studies that anyone finds Barth worth attending to."³

I here join the small but perhaps growing band of those (including Watson) who wish to take Barth seriously when he claims to be interpreting the text of Romans.⁴ One could, in fact, insist that at this stage in his life Barth considered himself to be first and foremost an interpreter of Paul: in his rediscovery of "the new world of the Bible," it was Paul who fascinated him most. Even in Göttingen, and then in Münster (where he was Professor of Dogmatics *and* New Testament Exegesis), Barth seems to have derived the greatest pleasure (and attracted

² Adolf Jülicher, "Ein moderner Paulusausleger," *Die christliche Welt* 34 (1920): 453–57; translated as "A Modern Interpreter of Paul," in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 72–81, here 80–81; James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (London: SCM Press, 1999), 57.

³ Francis B. Watson, "The Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66.

⁴ Besides Watson, cited above, see especially John Webster, "Karl Barth," in *Reading Romans Through the Centuries*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 205–24. For Webster, the *Römerbrief* "is a commentary, intended by Barth as such; and whatever abiding interest and worth it may have stands or falls by its success in fulfilling that intention" (205). As evidenced in this volume, others who share this view include Beverly Gaventa and Andreas Dettwiler.

the largest student audiences) in his lectures on the letters of Paul.⁵ But what does he mean when he says, “I have no message of my own, I have only statements about the message of Paul to make”?⁶ Does biblical scholarship have anything to learn from him in this regard? In this essay, after exploring what Barth understands as the role of commentary (or better: *Erklärung*), I will present his reading of one particular but very significant verse in Romans (Rom 1:16), contrasting his reading with standard historical-critical practices, so as to assess in what way he remains a provocation to the guild of biblical scholars.

2 What is the Goal of Commentary?

Barth raised questions about the goal of biblical studies by going to its very heart – its claim to *interpret* the biblical texts – and by offering an alternative version of its prime product, the commentary. Within the dominant historical paradigm of biblical studies, the scholarly New Testament commentary then had (and largely still has) certain primary characteristics: after establishing the form of the Greek text (sometimes with a fresh translation), there are philological comments on the Greek terms and phrases in their ancient cultural context, rhetorical or narrative analyses of the structure of the text, explorations of the history underlying the text and its possible sources, and comments on what the original author intended to say. With the focus on “the historical Paul,” placing the author and his text in its first-century context is both the purpose of the commentary and, generally, its limit.

Famously and to the fury of contemporary biblical scholars, Barth reproduced *none* of that in his *Römerbrief*, with the exception of a few, slightly idiosyncratic textual suggestions. He explained his reason for this omission only

5 See Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 23–31, citing a letter to Thurneysen in 1924: “What delights me most is the course on *The Epistle to the Philippians* on Wednesdays [...] *Paul! That's what it is!* Next to him all dogmatics is slime, and ethics too” (24–25, italics original). The Philippians commentary has been newly translated, with significant introductory essays by Bruce L. McCormack and Francis B. Watson: Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

6 Draft preface III for the first edition of the *Römerbrief*. All these drafts are gathered and translated in Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, Appendix 2 (citation here, 287). The German originals can easily be found in the online Digital Karl Barth Library (<https://dkbl.alexanderstreet.com/>). See also Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 581–602.

in the preface to the second edition, but that was too little, too late.⁷ All he says in the final version of his Preface to the 1919 *Römerbrief* is that the historical-critical method “has its rightful place: it is concerned with the preparation of understanding, which is never superfluous.”⁸ Barth claims that he has done that preparatory work, but that one can find it much better laid out in the standard commentaries of his day (among others, he mentions those by Bernhard Weiss, Frédéric Godet, Adolf Jülicher, Hans Lietzmann, and Theodor Zahn). As he put it in a draft Preface: “Whoever wants to be informed about the little one knows, and the great amount one does not know about the personality of Paul, about the composition of the Roman church, about Pauline ‘formulas’ in the context of the history of religions, or about the questions of authenticity [...] will be disappointed here.”⁹ All of that he leaves behind the scenes, not because he pitted his work *against* it, but because he wanted to advance a major step *beyond* it. Unfortunately, in the final version of the 1919 Preface, he boldly declared that “were I driven to choose between it [the historical-critical method] and the old doctrine of inspiration, I should resolutely choose the latter.”¹⁰ Even though he claimed that “fortunately, I am not compelled to choose between the two,” the complete absence of the historical work on the surface of his *Römerbrief* gave (and still gives) to most readers the impression that he *had* chosen between them. It did not help that Barth claimed to “see through and beyond the historical to the spirit of the Bible, which is the eternal Spirit”¹¹ – words that may have gained him the label “Pneumatiker,” which he thoroughly hated but never fully shook off.

In truth, Barth saw there to be something of a “chasm” between his method and the then dominant biblical scholarship, which he considered to have merely

7 As the draft prefaces for the first edition show, he could have said already in 1919 much of what he said later about his non-use of historical-critical scholarship. But it is not clear if that would have won him a better reception.

8 “Die historisch-kritische Methode der Bibelforschung hat ihr Recht: sie weist hin auf eine Vorbereitung des Verständnisses, die nirgends überflüssig ist”, my translation; all German citations are from the online Digital Karl Barth Library; cf. also Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3. Hoskyns’ translation, which speaks of “the preparation of the intelligence,” misconstrues the important word *Verständnis*.

9 Draft preface IA, Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 278. We may note the dig at historical speculation in the comment on “the great amount one does not know”!

10 “Aber wenn ich wählen müßte zwischen ihr und der alten Inspirationslehre, ich würde entschlossen zu der letztern greifen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3.

11 “Aber meine ganze Aufmerksamkeit war darauf gerichtet, durch das Historische hindurch zu sehen in den Geist der Bibel, der der ewige Geist ist.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3.

“antiquarian” interests.¹² The reason for his preference for “the old doctrine of inspiration” is that the latter is concerned with “the labour of understanding.”¹³ What had to be “understood” was the text’s reference to its subject-matter, its *Sache*. As he put it in the preface to the second edition, to *understand* Paul involves “disclosing how what is there in the text may be not just repeated in this or that way in Greek or German but *re-thought*, as it perhaps could have been *meant*.”¹⁴ This “re-thinking” – *Nachdenken*, not just *Nachsprechen* – requires that the interpreter engage with the subject-matter of the letter; and that engagement cannot leave the interpreter entirely “outside” the text and its *Sache*, as a purely “objective” observer. To some extent, what Barth says here about the task of understanding (*Verstehen*) he considers true of the interpretation of any significant work of literature. But since the subject matter of Romans is the “good news” in which “the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom 1:16–17), there is, as we shall see, a special sense in which the text draws the reader into participation with the *Sache*. For now, however, we should note that what Barth considers to be true explication (*Erklärung*; a term I think he prefers to *Kommentar*) involves not commentary “upon” Paul, as if he were himself the object of interest, but commentary “with” Paul, where the object to be understood is the *Sache* about which the text speaks.¹⁵ In other words, what has to be “understood” here is not the man, Paul, behind the text, in his historical conditions and limitations, but the *Sache* about which the text speaks, to which it points or bears witness. Provocatively, Barth expresses amazement at how little biblical scholars of his day have made any effort to attempt this, which is the real task of interpretation, and one might read his *Römerbrief* as a deliberately one-

12 Draft preface IA, Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 278, 281.

13 “Die Arbeit des Verstehens.” Again, Hoskyns’ “the labour of apprehending” does not quite get the point across.

14 In Barth’s own words, cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), x (the page number refers to the edition of 1922): “[...] Paulus zu *verstehen*, d.h. aufzudecken, wie das, was dasteht, nicht nur griechisch oder deutsch irgendwie nachgesprochen sondern nach-gedacht werden, wie es etwa *gemeint* sein könnte” (italics original). Hoskyns translates: “Now this involves more than mere repetition in Greek or German of what Paul says; it involves the re-thinking of what is set out in the Epistle, until the actual meaning of it is disclosed.”

15 This distinction between commentary “upon” (*über*) and commentary “with” (*mit*), is partly adumbrated in the draft preface IA, where Barth distinguishes between “knowing about Paul” and “drawing things from Paul” (Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 278), or between “standing with” a biblical author (participating in the same subject matter with him) and distancing oneself from him, outwardly examining him historically or psychologically (Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 281). It comes to classic expression, however, in the preface to the third edition.

sided attempt to compensate for this lack. Of course, as Barth recognized, everything here depends on perceiving aright what is the *Sache* of the text; get this wrong, and one spends one's time discussing one's own subject-matter, rather than the subject-matter of Romans. There are also, of course, many hazards in the standard historical forms of biblical studies: one might spend years of one's life, and many hundreds of pages, trying to decide what is historically undecidable, on the basis of inadequate historical evidence. But it is important to recognize the risk in what became known as *theologische Sachexegese*: if one misconstrues the *Sache* of a text, one ends up far removed from the text itself.¹⁶

3 Romans 1:16 in the Historical-Critical Frame

I have chosen to focus this essay on Romans 1:16, despite the obvious objection that this is only one particular verse out of the whole letter, and in the awareness that Barth insisted that the *Römerbrief* should be read as a unity, each particular in light of the flow and substance of the whole. My defence is not just shortage of space, but the observation that this verse is the beginning of a duet of verses (Romans 1:16–17) that Barth himself labelled *die Sache*;¹⁷ it constitutes, if you like, a very particular particular, and therefore a place where we might see Barth's mode of interpretation with special clarity. His treatment of this text is, I think, paradigmatic of his larger attempt to *understand* Romans, and the contrast between his reading of this verse and the ways it is handled in standard historical-critical commentaries displays clearly his provocation to the discipline of biblical studies.

Romans 1:16 is situated immediately after a string of comments (Rom 1:8–15) in which Paul indicates his relationship to the believers in Rome, and his long-held desire to come to Rome: “I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish – hence my eagerness to proclaim the good

¹⁶ Barth's reading of Romans 9–11 in the *Römerbrief* has often been cited as an example of this misconstrual. In the *Römerbrief* he takes the subject of these chapters to be “Israel, the Church, the world of religion as it appears in history,” whereas later (in *Church Dogmatics* II/2) he (rightly) took Paul to be speaking of Israel, not the Church. For careful analysis of this shift and of Barth's engagement with these chapters, see Wesley A. Hill, “The Church as Israel and Israel as the Church: An Examination of Karl Barth's Exegesis of Romans 9:1–5 in *The Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics* 2/2,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6.1 (2012): 139–58; cf. the essay in this volume by Beverly R. Gaventa, “Reading Romans on the Brink: The Continuing Challenge of Barth's *Römerbrief*”.

¹⁷ Hoskyns' translation, “The Theme of the Epistle,” does not seem fully adequate.

news to you also who are in Rome” (Rom 1:14–15). Then immediately: “For I am not ashamed of the good news, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, both to the Jew – first – and to the Greek” (1:16; οὐ γὰρ ἐπαισχύνομαι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, δύναμις γὰρ θεοῦ ἐστὶν εἰς σωτηρίαν παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι). And as its accompanying statement in the next verse, “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed, through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous by faith will live’” (1:17).

What would a historical critic say about our text, and in particular about the statement “For I am not ashamed of the good news”? Scanning a range of historical-critical commentaries, from Barth’s day and since, one might observe the following.¹⁸ First, there is discussion about the “for” (γὰρ) that stands at the start of this statement. Does that connect this verse to what precedes it (as one might expect), or are the statements of 1:16–17 a new beginning in the discourse, something like the *propositio* of the letter? In other words, on linguistic grounds, should we take the statement “I am not ashamed of the gospel” to look backwards (to Paul’s desire to visit Rome), or forwards to what follows (“for it is the power of God for salvation”), which is connected to it by another “for”? Or does it look both backwards and forwards?¹⁹ Secondly, there is extensive discussion of why Paul might say, “I am not ashamed.” The first step is the identification of the linguistic parallels for this Greek phrase, in Paul, in the New Testament, and elsewhere in ancient Greek literature. For some commentators, this is a strengthened way of saying “I am proud” (a *Bekräftigungsformel*), or a form of *litotes* (where “not something” means the opposite).²⁰ For others this is a confessional statement, parallel to “I acknowledge” or “I confess,” and the use of similar language in Mark 8:38 leads to speculation as to whether Paul is using a formula of confession used in the transmission of gospel material

18 There is a measure of truth in Webster’s comment that “in our day not less than Barth’s the biblical commentary remains largely in the hands of ancient historians” (Webster, “Karl Barth,” 222). While more self-consciously theological commentaries have emerged in recent decades, the primary concern of the “standard” commentaries remains within the parameters of historical enquiry.

19 See, e.g., Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 63–64. For the most sophisticated recent treatment of the meanings of γὰρ in this passage, see Sarah H. Casson, *Textual Signposts in the Argument of Romans* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 207–45.

20 Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8*, EKK 6/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2014), 114.

in early Christianity.²¹ For many, this raises the question: why would it occur to Paul that he might be ashamed of the good news? Was he intimidated by the thought of entering the world metropolis, or conscious of the questions around his apostleship? Was he aware of criticisms of his version of the good news, and thus anticipating a struggle to defend it? Or does he hark back here to the “Greeks” and the “wise” of 1:14, and does this phrase reflect his awareness that “the word of the cross” is, to human perception, foolish and weak (1 Cor 1:17–25)?²² In this connection, one might also draw attention to the wider cultural context of this statement, in the honour-shame culture of the Mediterranean world or, more specifically, the Roman definitions of honour and their expression in Roman imperial propaganda. In recent years, much attention has been given to the verbal parallels (εὐαγγέλιον, σωτηρία, δύναμις) between this verse and statements of Roman power and victory, “over against” which Paul offers a “contrast,” and something of a “social and ideological revolution.”²³ The link with the second half of the verse (linked by “for”), if it is discussed, is typically explained with reference to the word “power”: Paul’s good news is not shameful because it is powerful, a power above other powers that can do all it promises.²⁴ It is notable that in the extensive discussion of all the main Greek words in the second half of this verse (δύναμις, σωτηρία, πιστεύω) there is typically *no* discussion of the word θεός, whose meaning is taken for granted. The precise nuances of “power” and “salvation” are carefully weighed: “God” requires no consideration. Throughout such commentary there is copious reference to other Pauline texts and, of course, extensive discussion of the views of other scholars.

21 Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1955), 51; C.K. Barrett, “I am not Ashamed of the Gospel,” in *New Testament Essays* (London: SPCK, 1972), 116–43.

22 See Hans Lietzmann, *An die Römer*, HNT 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1906); cf. the extended discussion in Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 159–63.

23 Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 137–41.

24 Charles E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 87.

4 Romans 1:16 in the *Römerbrief*

What do we find in the *Römerbrief*?²⁵ It is notable that Barth’s commentary slows down appreciably at this point, with far more discussion of 1:16–17 than of all 1:8–15 put together, no doubt because he considered 1:16–17 to express *die Sache*.

When I show this passage to my students, they are at first completely bewildered.²⁶ This has very little in common with what they expect to find in a “commentary”; in fact, it takes them some time to work out what relationship, if any, this has to Paul’s text. Is this just some sort of theological rocket which has taken off from the text of Romans but now has its own trajectory quite independent of its launch-pad? One notices here, for instance, no reference to other scholars’ views, no “concordance philology” (citing parallels to Paul’s vocabulary in other texts), and no reference to Paul’s historical situation. In literary terms, there is no discussion of how this text relates, if at all, to the verses before it,

²⁵ I focus here on the 1919 edition, whose opening comments on this verse run as follows, cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 19–20 (first edition 6–7): “Eine Sache, die in der Welthauptstadt schüchtern *verschwiegen* werden müßte, ist das Evangelium jedenfalls *nicht*. Die Leser brauchen sich damit inmitten der Konkurrenz der Religionen und Philosophien nicht befangen und verlegen zu fühlen, Paulus wird es auch nicht tun. Es erträgt und es schlägt diese Konkurrenz. Es ist nicht *eine* Wahrheit, sondern *die* Wahrheit. Wer sie erkennt, soll sich keinen Augenblick Sorge machen um ihren Sieg, sondern er soll vor allem stolz darauf sein, daß er sie erkennen darf. Er braucht sie nicht zu vertreten und zu tragen, wie die andern, die menschlichen Geistesbewegungen und Religionsunternehmungen, vertreten und getragen sein wollen, sondern sie vertritt und trägt *ihn*. Berufene des Christus ([Röm] 1,6), die sich mit Gott genieren, die sich ängsten um den Gang ihrer Sache – eine Unmöglichkeit! Gott müßte sich *unser* schämen, wenn er nicht Gott wäre, aber nicht umgekehrt. Gott geht, nicht wir gehen.

Es ist *Kraft* ausgegangen von Gott in der Auferstehung des Christus von den Toten. Das ist’s, was hinter uns steht, ganz abgesehen von allem, was wir sind, denken und treiben. Keine Theorie wird hier aufgerichtet, keine abstrakte Moral gepredigt, kein neuer Kultus empfohlen. Alles derartige, was auch unter uns auftauchen mag, ist menschliches Beiwerk, gefährlicher religiöser Rest, bedauerliches Mißverständnis, nicht die Sache selbst. Würde es sich nur *darum* handeln, dann müßten wir uns allerdings bald «schämen», dann ständen wir nicht konkurrenzlos da, dann müßten wir der Welt erliegen, sobald *ihre* Kräfte gegen uns ins Spiel träten. Denn in der Welt sind auch Kräfte (8,38), und die sind stärker als unsre Ideen. Aber wir haben nicht Ideen hinter uns, sondern die Kraft aller Kräfte, die darum auch die Idee aller Ideen ist: die Kraft Gottes. Unsre Sache ist unsre im Christus realisierte Erkenntnis Gottes, in der uns Gott nicht gegenständlich, sondern unmittelbar und schöpferisch nahetritt, in der wir nicht nur schauen, sondern *erschaut werden*, nicht nur verstehen, sondern verstanden *sind*, nicht nur begreifen, sondern *ergriffen* sind.”

²⁶ To be precise, I show them the Hoskyns translation of the 1922 edition of the *Römerbrief*.

and thus no reflection on the Paul who speaks here in the first-person (“I”). Barth’s reading of Rom 1:16 takes its two halves to be interconnected (as suggested by the $\gamma\acute{\alpha}\rho$ at its centre). Thus, he takes the reason *why* Paul is not ashamed of the good news to be given right here: because it is the power of God. Thus Barth completely side-steps all that one might offer by way of historical speculation concerning Paul’s psychological fears of Rome, or concern for his own reputation. He is conscious that it is the historical Paul speaking, and that Rome, the *Welthauptstadt*, is on his horizon. But the key question is not about the relation between Paul and Rome, but the relation between Paul and the good news (*Evangelium*). Barth does not “mirror-read” the statement “I am not ashamed” so as to ask who might be telling Paul that he *should* be ashamed; nor does he refer to 1 Corinthians 1, to speak of the apparent weakness of the cross (which is not a theme in Romans). It is as if Barth has deliberately limited himself to focus entirely and solely on what is in the text (not what might stand behind it), to bear down with almost laser-like precision on *this* text, and to concern himself with the logic by which “I am not ashamed of the good news” is founded on the statement, “it is the power of God for salvation.”

By adopting that focus, Barth finds here a reason why not only Paul, but *no-one at all* could or should be ashamed of the good news. In other words, Barth takes Paul to be speaking not to divulge a piece of autobiographical information, but to instruct his readers on the attitude that *they* should take to the good news, in alignment with him. In fact, by the end of this paragraph the language is not about Paul or his original readers, but about “us”: if God were not God, he would have to be ashamed of *us*, rather than vice versa. In other words, a short paragraph that begins with Paul and Rome ends with God and “us.” Barth is trying to think not “about” Paul but “with” Paul concerning why the good news of the power of God could in no way be considered a matter of embarrassment or shame.

To be “ashamed” of the good news would imply that it is deficient or inferior in some respect. “Shame” indicates comparison, in which value is measured by someone’s criteria of value, and it suggests that by their standards you, or something you value, is found wanting. But this would be to treat the good news as a competitor in the *Konkurrenz der Religionen und Philosophien*, in which one is required to defend it, anxious for its success. As Barth reads Paul, that is simply impossible, because the good news is not one truth among many, but “*the Truth [die Wahrheit]*”. It can justifiably claim this exalted status on the ground of the second half of the verse. The good news is (not “it proclaims,” but “it is”) the power of God, which Barth importantly glosses here as “a power that has issued from God in the resurrection of Christ from the dead [*Es ist Kraft ausgegangen von Gott in der Auferstehung des Christus von den Toten*]” (cf. Rom 1:4).

This “power of God” is now placed into a series of antitheses, “*keine Theorie [...] keine abstrakte Moral [...] kein neuer Kultus*,” indicating that this is not just one power among other worldly powers (as detailed in Rom 8:38), which would be stronger than our ideas. But what takes place in the good news is not ideas, and certainly not *our* ideas, but “the power of all powers [...] the power of God.”

What is suggested here is that the power and truth of God are not just greater than the power and truth of all worldly phenomena, but incommensurable. To speak of the power of *God*, a power at work in the resurrection of the *dead*, is to speak of a reality that cannot be mapped onto the same terrain as human power, and cannot be compared, contrasted, or found wanting. That claim will be strengthened and developed in the second edition of the *Römerbrief*. There Barth puts immediate emphasis on the *Begrenzung* of the known world “durch eine andere, unbekannte,” followed by a characteristic example of Barthian dialectic: “*Sie ist als Aufhebung und Begründung alles Gegebenen der Sieg, der die Welt überwindet.*”²⁷ One senses, in fact, that Barth finds in this verse a perfect vehicle for drawing out “the infinite qualitative difference” between the world and God, a chasm that is both bridged and revealed by the in-breaking power of God.²⁸

How should we evaluate what we find in this small but significant sample of Barth’s *Erklärung* of the text? Of course, Barth’s reading of this text draws from, and is supported by, his reading of the *whole* letter: it would be unfair to isolate this piece of interpretation without taking seriously Barth’s plea that each piece of exegesis is justified by all that came before and all that comes after in the flow of the letter.²⁹ But in the absence of a complete exegesis of the letter to the Romans, we may still evaluate Barth’s interpretation *as a reading of this text*. Let me make six observations on this matter:

1. First, the person of Paul is present in this text from Romans, but Barth is justified in taking the subject matter to be more about the good news than about Paul. Paul does write in the first person (“I am not ashamed”) although he could have left himself out of the picture: he might have written “we are not ashamed of the good news” or (impersonally) “the good news is not shameful.” The first-

²⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 11.

²⁸ Comparison of Barth’s commentary on precisely this passage might indeed display the distance that Barth had travelled between 1919 and 1922 – but that is an analysis I leave to others more expert in the field.

²⁹ Cf. the draft preface IA, Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 279: “If the whole which I intended to present is substantiated in itself, then it also substantiates the particular, despite all differences of opinion, whereas more than one stunning book about Paul serves to warn us that a thousand correct particulars certainly do not always make an intelligible and well-founded whole.”

person form follows from the previous verses, and Barth's failure to register that connection (signalled by the first γάρ) could be considered a weakness in his reading. But one might well argue that Paul was not particularly interested in himself except in the capacity in which he introduces himself at the start of the letter: "Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the good news of God" (1:1). In other words, despite the fascination of historical critics with the historical Paul, with his personal traits and individual experiences, one is justified in reading his "I" in "I am not ashamed" as "I, an apostle set apart for the good news of God, am not ashamed of that good news." If so, the point of interest in this verse is not Paul's psychological state or social reputation, but the status and claim of the good news.³⁰

2. Secondly, we may note the near total absence of cross-references to other Pauline letters in Barth's reading of this text, but that is hardly because Barth was unaware of them. As he understands it, his task is not to interpret "Pauline theology" as if what matters is what Paul said on this or that theme, but to interpret *the letter to the Romans*. The logic seems to be: if Paul does not here mention the "weakness" of the cross (Barth surely knew 1 Corinthians 1 almost by heart!), that must be because *that* was not the focal point of his interest in this particular text. The constraint exercised here might seem excessive, but when one observes the strings of cross-references typical in commentaries, which sometimes *take the place* of an attempt to interpret the subject matter, it is a discipline for which we might be grateful.

3. Barth declines to speculate about what might lie behind the text, what might have been in Paul's mind or what were the historical conditions in which he might be made to feel ashamed. The focus is on the text, not on the possible anxieties of the author, and, in line with the text, the question is not why Paul *might have been* ashamed, but why he was *not*. And since the γάρ in the middle of this verse arguably offers the reason for the statement "I am not ashamed," Barth is justified in relating the lack of shame to the fact that the good news is "the power of God for salvation."

4. There is also some justification for Barth's reading of the text as Paul's refusal of an alternative mode of thought. Paul could have said simply, "I am proud of the good news," just as elsewhere he "boasts" in the cross of Christ (Gal 6:14). That would have been an entirely positive statement, with no hint of an opposing option. The use of the negative expression, "I am not ashamed,"

³⁰ Note the opening words of the preface to the first edition: "Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries. It is, however, far more important that, as Prophet and Apostle of the Kingdom of God, he veritably speaks to all men of every age." Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 1, Hoskyns' translation.

suggests that the good news stands *over against* alternative criteria for judgement. The use of antithesis to sharpen a positive expression is a characteristically Pauline mode of expression, but Barth is notable for taking it so seriously and thus interpreting the good news in starkly antithetical terms.

5. Where other interpreters emphasise the notion of *power* in the second part of our verse, Barth puts equal or more emphasis on the fact that the good news is the power *of God*. This fits what Paul had said about being “set apart for the good news *of God*” (Rom 1:1), but it reflects Barth’s fascination (already in 1919, deepened in the second edition) with what Paul said about *God*. Other commentators took (and take) for granted that Paul spoke about God, since almost everyone in antiquity spoke about the divine in one form or another. But for Barth, if one is speaking truly about *God* – the God who revealed God’s self in Jesus and who raised Jesus from the dead – one cannot be speaking about anything in this world, or anything we could imagine, assimilate to, or approach from this side of the line that distinguishes the Creator from the creature. This is where Barth’s understanding of the *Sache* of the letter comes most obviously into play. As he put it in the preface to the second edition: “Questioned as to the ground of my assumption that this [that is, the permanent *Krisis* between time and eternity] was, in fact, Paul’s theme, I answer by asking quite simply whether, if the Epistle is to be treated seriously at all, it is reasonable to approach it with any other assumption than that God is God.”³¹ This counter-question gives the appearance of being more Diktat than reasoned argument, but a fair case could be made that it is God’s gracious bridging and exposure of the *incongruity* between God and the human condition, Creator and creature, righteousness and sin, resurrection and death that runs like a scarlet thread through this letter, justifying Barth’s baldly stated assumption. Nowadays, interpreters express little interest in what Paul says about God, and much more in the final statement of this verse, concerning the salvation of everyone who believes, *both Jew and Greek*. We are currently fascinated by the way that Paul configures ethnicity, as a reflection of our own concerns with ethnic identity and its complexities in our postmodern world.³² Barth,

³¹ Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 11, Hoskyns’ translation. In the original: “Sollte man mich freilich weiterfragen, mit welchem Grund ich gerade mit dieser Annahme an den Römerbrief herantrete, so würde ich mit der Gegenfrage antworten, ob denn ein ernster Mensch etwa mit einer andern Annahme an einen nicht zum vornherein keines Ernstes würdigen Text herantreten könne als mit der Annahme, daß – Gott Gott ist?” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xiv.

³² For this theme in recent Pauline studies, see, e.g., Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

I guess, would insist that we can understand Paul's approach to such an issue only if we start not with human ethnicity but with the power of God, and take our bearings on ourselves from there.³³

6. Finally, we should note that Paul says here not that the good news is *about* the power of God, but that it *is* the power of God. In other words, the message and its communication not only describe but *convey* the powerful act of God towards the world. In this sense, the good news is not a human attempt to express what has been done by God, but is itself part of that act, communicated of course with all the normal human failings, but a communication that originates from the God side of the God-human divide. This is what justifies Barth's insistence here that the good news is not "a truth among other truths" but *the* Truth. Watson summarizes well Barth's understanding of the biblical authors as *witnesses*:

they point to the event of God's self-disclosure and self-constitutive action, the action that makes God the God he is; and as they do so, the event itself speaks, for the event is communicative action, the divine speech-act. The witness to "what we have heard and seen" is therefore a witness not to an inert object safely located in the past, but to the *living* God, and it is his voice that sounds forth in the voice of the witness.³⁴

That resonates with Paul's statement here that in the good news "the righteousness of God is revealed" (1:17): not just "spoken about" but *revealed*, as a salvific agent at work in the world. In this sense, one can hardly claim to *understand* this text unless one gives attention to what it might mean to say that God is powerfully active in the good news. And as soon as one realizes that that is the *Sache* of this text, one cannot avoid becoming, to some degree, subjectively engaged in the very attempt to understand it.

5 Barth as Provocation

"Of my friendly readers," wrote Barth, "I ask that they should take nothing and believe nothing from me which they are not of themselves persuaded stands within the meaning of what Paul wrote."³⁵ As we have seen, for Barth to establish the "meaning of what Paul wrote" means pressing into the text to grasp its *Sache*, and Barth recognizes fully that others might not agree with his identification of that *Sache*. But if readers disagree with him, it is not enough for them to

³³ For an exploration along such lines, see John M.G. Barclay, "An Identity Received from God: The Theological Configuration of Paul's Kinship Discourse," *Early Christianity* 8 (2017): 354–72.

³⁴ Watson, "The Bible," 62.

³⁵ Preface to English translation, *Epistle to the Romans*, x.

limit themselves to historical reconstruction; if they make a claim to *interpret* the text, they need to commit themselves to grasping that *Sache* for themselves. In other words, Barth is not stepping *back* from historical exegesis, but stepping *forward* from it, into an *understanding* of what the text is talking about. This task of understanding, he argues, necessarily involves the participation of the reader, because no-one can claim to “understand” something that they have not, in some measure, made a part of themselves. It is in this sense that Barth insists, on the one hand, that what he is doing is *exegesis* not *eisegesis* (*auslegen*, not *einlegen*), but on the other, that no-one can do anything worth calling *exegesis* who has not also brought themselves *into* the subject-matter of the text: “Whoever does not continually ‘read in’ because he participates in the subject matter cannot ‘read out’ either.”³⁶ And this “participation” (literally, collaboration: *mitarbeiten*) means that the gap between the reader (in the present) and the author (in the past) is closed up. As Barth goes on immediately to say, “Thus I speak in the following of Paul’s questions as our questions in the belief that they really *are*, and let Paul speak about our questions in the belief that he really *has*.”³⁷ Of course, this is hazardous: what if Paul is *not* speaking about matters that concern us? Barth would accept, I think, that that is entirely possible, but if we find that Paul’s questions do not really concern us, we must conclude that we cannot understand him either. In other words, this closing of the gap is in the first instance not a theological point, but a hermeneutical one.³⁸

At the broadest level, then, Barth’s challenge to biblical studies is to recognise that the extent to which it refuses to take this self-involving step of *understanding* is the extent to which it has limited itself: this is not a matter of “freedom” from dogma, but of “restriction” by the adoption of historicist parameters. And to involve oneself in understanding the *Sache* of Romans is to become engaged with the assumption of the text that the good news to which it witnesses not only speaks about God but claims to speak *from* God. Of course, one does not have to accept that claim, but it is hard to see how one can profess to *understand*

36 Draft preface III, Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, 288; German original: “Wer nicht beständig «einlegt» weil er an der Sache mitarbeitet, kann auch nicht «auslegen».” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 596.

37 “So rede ich im Folgenden von den Fragen des Paulus als von unseren eigenen Fragen, in der Meinung, daß sie es wirklich *sind*, und lasse Paulus von unseren Fragen reden in der Meinung, daß er es wirklich *getan* hat.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 597.

38 The procedure here is parallel to the way that contemporary philosophers discuss Plato (or any ancient philosopher) as raising questions that concern us, while recognizing that they wrote in very different times and circumstances; see, for instance, Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

(rather than just describe) the *Sache* of the text if one does not at least make a committed effort to *imagine* seeing the world as the text defines it. To refuse this step would be to become not more *wissenschaftlich*, but less. Theological *Sachexegese* thus emerges not as a betrayal or contamination of biblical studies, but as its fullest form.³⁹ To rule out from biblical studies all self-involving speech about God would be to limit the possibilities of understanding, taking a position outside the subject-matter of text in a way that refuses to engage fully with its content. This, it seems to me, is the real challenge of Karl Barth to biblical studies – what made him so provocative to his contemporaries, and what makes him provocative today. In the century since Karl Barth, biblical studies has come to recognize and challenge many of its in-built prejudices and assumptions – its European rationalist framework, its tendency to anti-Semitism, its colonial prejudices, and its white, male, and heterosexual blinkers. The one barrier it has not challenged, and its ultimate self-encasement, is its hesitancy – and in many circles, its refusal – to engage theologically with the subject-matter of its texts. Its secularist standpoint is, one might say, the last form of Enlightenment captivity that it has yet to escape. Barth's call is not to return to a "pre-critical" era, but to engage with the text with all the *critical* tools supplied by theology, wrestling with the text regarding its theological subject-matter by full participation in the challenge it issues to the reader.⁴⁰ The freedom to engage with the text in that way is likely to make biblical studies richer and fuller, without requiring that it lessen its interest in the historical origins of the text.

39 This claim is, of course, controversial. For an alternative view, see Stephen L. Young, "'Let's Take the Text Seriously': The Protectionist *Doxa* of Mainstream New Testament Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 32 (2019): 328–63. For Young, scholarship that "reproduces the mythmaking" of New Testament sources is simply failing to be "critical." Of course, what Barth called for was not a "reproduction" of the language of the text, but an attempt to understand what it is speaking about.

40 In the preface to the second edition, Barth spoke of the "critical" work (κρίνειν) that theological exegesis can perform. Bultmann's review suggested that this criticism would sometimes necessitate a judgement that the text was theologically inadequate (in a procedure that would later be termed *Sachkritik*); see Rudolf Bultmann, "Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* in its Second Edition," in Robinson, *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, 100–20, see note 2. Barth's response in the preface to the third edition points to a significant difference in method and approach, but shares Bultmann's concern to analyse this theological text with *critical* theological tools.

Benoît Bourguine

La Bible pour penser

Abstract: The prefaces to the first and second editions of the *Römerbrief* indicate that Barth is not satisfied with thinking the Bible: in a “tenacious will to understand and explain” by which he relates the Bible to what it speaks of, Barth thinks with the Bible. Through an approach of a hermeneutical nature that anticipates certain intuitions of Gadamer, he poses again as a theologian the question of truth. Beyond the Spinozist turn of the radical Enlightenment, theology rediscovers the audacity to think in its time from the Bible and dares to cross again the trajectory of European culture to worry it with the “impossible possibility” of the God of Jesus Christ. A century later, what significance can theology give to this event? Which position, in 2022, could match this inspiration?

1 Introduction

Dans le *Römerbrief*, Barth prétend renouer avec l’acte théologique par excellence qui consiste à penser avec la Bible. *Penser avec la Bible*, et non pas seulement penser la Bible en accumulant à son propos une masse de données historiques et littéraires aussi valides que vaines tant qu’elles ne sont pas mises au service de la recherche de la Parole de Dieu dans les paroles de l’Écriture. *Penser avec la Bible*, et non pas seulement parler de l’homme, du monde ou de la religion en confrontant de l’extérieur les questions contemporaines aux thématiques affleurant les livres sacrés. En christianisme, le travail théologique consiste traditionnellement à porter au langage une connaissance ajustée à la révélation de Dieu et de sa grâce. Pour ce faire, la question de la vérité est posée depuis l’écoute de la Parole de Dieu perçue à travers les mots de l’Écriture, elle-même lue conformément au *Credo* ecclésial, depuis le *hic et nunc* d’une recherche toujours située historiquement, intellectuellement, culturellement, et assumée à la première personne.

Pour prendre toute la mesure du geste barthien dans le *Römerbrief*, le présent article s’interroge, dans une première étape, sur sa portée respectivement herméneutique, épistémologique et apologétique avant de proposer, dans une seconde étape et sur ces mêmes registres, une prise de position qui en reconduise l’ambition en 2022.

2 Penser avec la Bible : signification du *Römerbrief*

Évaluant la théologie au XVIII^e siècle, Barth regrette qu'elle suive le mouvement culturel avec un temps de retard, incapable de susciter des idées nouvelles. Le contraste est cruel avec l'époque de Calvin et de Luther qui furent les « chefs de file de leur époque » (*Führer dieser Zeitbewegung*).¹ Cette théologie des Lumières n'a guère eu d'impact sur l'évolution religieuse et intellectuelle du temps, faute d'indiquer une direction souhaitable. Que représentent en effet les Lumières sinon « la tentative grandiose, entreprise par le XVIII^e siècle avec une magnifique assurance, de traiter l'ensemble des données naturelles et historiques comme des données appartenant à l'homme, qu'il est donc possible de lui assimiler et d'humaniser, cette tentative s'étendait également, et non en dernier lieu, à l'objet de la théologie, à savoir au christianisme »² ? Or ce mouvement, les théologiens se contentent de le suivre. Le diagnostic barthien est sévère : si les théologiens regrettent d'être mis au rancart, c'est moins par « amour de leur cause » (*um ihrer Sache willen*) que par la perte de prestige que cela comporte. Il en trouve la preuve dans le fait que, plutôt que de s'occuper de l'objet de la théologie, ils mettent leur zèle à imiter le geste absolutiste de l'homme des Lumières en subordonnant leur objet à cette primauté de la toute-puissance humaine. Qu'est-ce qui a donc manqué à la théologie de ce temps ?

[...] une chose lui a fait complètement défaut : c'est la question vitale de savoir si la cause qu'elle avait à soutenir devant l'Église et le monde de manière si particulièrement responsable n'obéissait pas à une impulsion intérieure qui lui était propre, lui interdisant à elle, la théologie, de se conformer au mouvement du dehors et de concentrer tous ses efforts sur sa justification vis-à-vis de l'Église et du monde, pour se maintenir elle-même avec plus ou moins de bonheur, mettant ainsi justement en jeu son droit à l'existence. [...] Si seulement elle s'était préoccupée de son sujet avec tout l'absolutisme que l'homme de son temps mettait en œuvre pour poursuivre son but à lui ! Mais les enfants du monde ont sans doute eu de tout temps plus de bon sens que les enfants de lumière.³

Quelle est donc cette « impulsion intérieure [...] propre » à la théologie (*eigene, innere Bewegung*) ? Quelle est cette cause (*Sache*), ce sujet (*Thema*) auxquels les théologiens auraient dû s'attacher ?

¹ Karl Barth, *La Théologie protestante au dix-neuvième siècle: préhistoire et histoire*, trad. Lore Jeanneret (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1969), 73.

² Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 25.

³ Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 75.

[...] quand le théologien s'engage dans un mouvement violemment progressiste, ce progrès, toujours à retardement, n'est pas motivé au premier chef par une nécessité d'ordre purement théologique, mais par un facteur extérieur, de sorte que les théologiens ne peuvent jamais savourer en paix les fruits de leur modernisme et que, *nolens volens*, ils se trouvent plus dépassés que jamais.⁴

Pour peser sur son temps, Barth recommande à la théologie, non de suivre le mouvement des idées, mais de s'occuper de sa chose, de sa cause, son thème ; c'est ainsi qu'elle se rend capable de déployer toute son énergie et, le cas échéant, d'initier un mouvement de pensée. La théologie en est capable si elle consent à se centrer sur la nécessité interne qui lui est propre, non à se décentrer vers des facteurs externes.

Tout en déplorant l'attitude atone de la théologie des Lumières, Barth décrit en négatif l'attitude offensive de la position théologique de son *Römerbrief* vis-à-vis de l'Église, de la science et de la culture de son temps. Barth décrit un arc qui prend son départ depuis la chose de la théologie et aboutit à une influence culturelle de la théologie.

Examinons ce mouvement en trois temps. «Penser avec la Bible», c'est tendre vers l'objet de la théologie, à savoir la Parole du Dieu vivant (1.1 volet théologique), c'est honorer la prétention de vérité de cette Parole à entendre à travers les paroles de l'Écriture, non en ignorant la méthode critique, mais en critiquant la critique de manière à être plus critique qu'elle, à partir d'une réflexion sur ce que signifie comprendre et expliquer (1.2 volet épistémologique), c'est aller à l'encontre du profond mouvement intellectuel qui porte le christianisme depuis Spinoza, âme des Lumières radicales, à courir derrière le diktat de la méthode critique, et de restreindre la quête de vérité au contexte historique et littéraire de l'Écriture : retrouver l'audace d'entendre dans les Écritures une Parole que l'homme ne peut se dire à lui-même, mais qu'il peut entendre aujourd'hui pour changer son regard sur la foi, l'Église et le monde tel qu'il va (1.3 volet culturel).

2.1 L'impulsion intérieure (volet herméneutique)

Depuis la distinction intervenue à la fin du XVIII^e siècle entre théologie biblique et théologie dogmatique, destinée à garantir l'autonomie de la recherche historique et littéraire de la Bible, l'exégèse se recommande par sa distance vis-à-vis de tout préjugé dogmatique. Ce qui est nouveau dans l'entreprise du *Römerbrief*,

⁴ Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 73–74.

c'est la prétention assumée par Barth de lire Paul en théologien et, dans ce commentaire, de ne rien faire d'autre que de la théologie.⁵

Le choix de la Bible

Partir de la chose de la théologie plutôt que de se mettre à la remorque de l'esprit du temps : voilà pourquoi Barth choisit de commenter *L'épître aux Romains* plutôt que de livrer un traité sur *L'essence du christianisme*. La suggestion de Thurneysen de chercher une «base théologique tout autre»⁶ trouve une voie naturelle pour le pasteur qu'est Barth : «tout en réapprenant l'ABC de la théologie, nous recommencions à lire et à commenter l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament, poussant notre réflexion plus loin qu'auparavant. Et voilà que ces écrits commencèrent à nous parler – d'une manière très différente de celle que nous avons cru discerner à l'école de la théologie «moderne»».⁷ C'est là qu'intuitivement Barth se porte, non par curiosité intellectuelle, mais mû par la détresse de sa tâche de pasteur.⁸

Le mode de lecture

Il ne suffit pas de recommencer par la Bible ; il convient aussi de la lire à contrecourant de la théologie libérale, accaparée par l'exégèse historico-critique. Les préfaces non publiées à la première édition du *Römerbrief*, telles qu'elles ont été étudiées par Richard E. Burnett,⁹ indiquent explicitement l'intention :

Le présent livre est un essai de lire dans la Bible autrement qu'on ne l'enseigne dans les universités encore sous la domination de la théologie du XIX^e siècle. Question : autrement, jusqu'à quel point ? J'ai envie de répondre : de manière plus proche de l'objet, du contenu,

⁵ «Je n'ai jamais imaginé faire autre chose que, justement, de la *théologie* [...] Je ne cache donc pas que ce qui attend ici le lecteur, c'est, tout bonnement, de la théologie». Karl Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains [édition de 1922]*, trad. Pierre Jundt (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2016), 12.

⁶ Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 448. Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (München: C.H. Beck, 2019), 99.

⁷ Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 449.

⁸ «Oui certes, c'est la détresse de ma tâche de pasteur qui m'a amené à saisir avec plus d'âpreté la volonté de comprendre et d'expliquer la Bible». Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 16.

⁹ Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis. The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II/145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

de l'essence (*sachlicher, inhaltlicher, wesentlicher*), en pénétrant dans le sens de la Bible elle-même avec davantage d'attention et d'amour.¹⁰

Le parti-pris de l'interprétation barthienne est de poser que «la Bible est un bon livre et qu'il vaut la peine que l'on saisisse ses pensées, à tout le moins avec autant de gravité que les siennes propres».¹¹ Barth se concentre sur l'objet de la Bible, sur «ce qui se tient là» (*was da steht*) – expression répétée à plusieurs reprises dans la préface à la deuxième édition.

La quête de l'objet

La volonté de se concentrer sur l'objet, et de laisser au second plan les considérations littéraires, historiques, religieuses ou culturelles, est déterminée par le fait qu'il y a bien une «question cardinale» (*Kardinalfrage*) : cette «relation entre les vocables et la Parole incluse en eux, il importe qu'elle soit dévoilée aussi largement que possible».¹² C'est bien comme témoignage de la révélation que la Bible est lue de manière à rejoindre le Dieu qui s'y dit en Jésus-Christ : «La relation entre *ce* Dieu-*ci* et *cet* homme-*ci*, la relation entre *cet* homme-*ci* et *ce* Dieu-*ci*, constitue pour moi, tout ensemble, le thème de la Bible et la somme de la philosophie. Les philosophes désignent cette crise de la connaissance humaine comme étant l'origine. La Bible voit, à ce carrefour, Jésus-Christ».¹³ Le préjugé conscient que Barth applique à la lecture de *Romains* est que Paul parle de la signification de cette relation, qu'il parle donc du cœur de la vie chrétienne.

L'identité d'objet

Une telle lecture est menée au nom de cette communauté d'expérience entre Paul et le lecteur, entre le Dieu de Paul et le Dieu du lecteur, en vertu du fait que Dieu parle aujourd'hui comme il a parlé à Paul et que je peux entendre la parole actuelle qu'il m'adresse à travers la parole qu'il a adressée à Paul. Il y a identité d'objet. C'est ce que Barth, dans la préface à la deuxième édition, tire de

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 581–82. L'ouvrage de Richard E. Burnett commente la dernière proposition.

¹¹ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 19.

¹² Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 16.

¹³ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 17.

l'exégèse de Calvin, qui entend en homme du xvi^e ce que Paul dit au i^{er} siècle « jusqu'à ce que l'entretien entre le document et le lecteur soit entièrement concentré sur l'*objet* (qui, ici et là-bas, ne *peut* pas être différent !) ». ¹⁴ C'est qu'en effet, « [s]i nous nous comprenons nous-mêmes comme il faut, nos questions sont celles de l'apôtre Paul, et les réponses de l'apôtre, si leur lumière nous éclaire, doivent nécessairement être les nôtres ». ¹⁵ Ce dont témoigne Paul répond aux questions qui se posent à la vie chrétienne d'aujourd'hui. Entendre ces réponses dans leur actualité suppose d'adopter une attitude d'écoute qui a permis à Paul de s'en faire le témoin : écouter avec foi le Dieu qui parle. Il existe une étroite ressemblance entre le processus de la révélation et celui conduisant à la foi en la révélation. Tel est le présupposé de nature théologique de la lecture à laquelle Barth procède. Est ainsi énoncée la condition de possibilité de l'acte théologique, en sa racine : l'écoute de la Parole actuelle de Dieu à travers la lecture du témoignage des écrivains bibliques attestant ce qui s'est donné à l'origine. Aucune méthode ne peut par elle-même donner accès à cette Parole, aucune mise en condition n'est à même de disposer infailliblement à cette écoute. Comme il l'écrira dans les premières pages de la *Dogmatique* :

Il n'existe pas de méthode qui permette de transformer la révélation en révélation réellement acceptée ; pas de méthode d'exégèse réellement pneumatique, c'est-à-dire capable de porter au langage le témoignage de la révélation contenu dans la Bible et ainsi montrer le chemin de l'Esprit à travers une exégèse scripturaire. ¹⁶

Seule la foi permet de percevoir cette Parole de la même manière que le témoignage de première main des apôtres et prophètes vaut en fonction de leur perception de foi. Il s'agit là d'un présupposé de base qu'un auteur catholique, aux antipodes de la méthode théologique barthienne, tel Karl Rahner, ne peut que rejoindre, par exemple quand il soutient « l'unité et l'homologie originaires entre le processus de Révélation et celui de la foi en la Révélation ». ¹⁷

L'impulsion intérieure, à savoir la nécessité interne d'où la théologie puise l'énergie de son geste propre, est identifiée : elle correspond au plan épistémologie à ce qu'il désigne en 1923 dans sa lettre ouverte à Harnack le « courage

¹⁴ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 15.

¹⁵ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 9.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Dogmatique*, trad. Fernand Ryser, dir. Jacques de Senarclens (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1932–1967), I, t. 1*, 177 (trad. modifiée).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *Traité fondamental de la foi. Études sur le concept du christianisme*, Œuvres 26, trad. Gwendoline Jarczyk (Paris: Cerf, 2011), 310.

pour l'objectivité [*Der Mut zur Sachlichkeit*]¹⁸ : la voie du renouveau pour la théologie est de retrouver le courage de témoigner de la parole de la révélation, de l'amour et du jugement de Dieu.

2.2 Le courage de l'objectivité (volet épistémologique)

Depuis les préfaces aux différentes éditions jusqu'aux dernières pages de la deuxième édition, Barth assume consciemment une posture épistémologique consistant à s'attacher résolument à la « chose » (*Sache*) de la théologie, la relation à laquelle Dieu convie l'homme en Jésus-Christ. Voilà ce qu'il rappelle dans le commentaire des derniers versets de l'épître aux Romains : « Scientificité signifie objectivité. L'objectivité dans la théologie, c'est respecter inconditionnellement la singularité de son thème d'élection : l'homme dans son ultime détresse et dans son ultime espérance, l'homme devant Dieu ». ¹⁹ On ne peut qu'être frappé par la similitude entre cette concentration sur la chose, revendiquée dans son commentaire, et le cœur de l'herméneutique philosophique de Gadamer : « *La tâche herméneutique accède d'elle-même à une problématique qui porte sur le fond (sachliche) et qui la commande dès le départ. L'entreprise herméneutique accède ainsi à la terre ferme* ». ²⁰

Comme l'indique Gadamer, le *Römerbrief* est bien un « manifeste herméneutique » ²¹ en ce qu'il représente une réflexion conséquente sur ce que « comprendre » veut dire, en ce qu'il pose la question de la vérité d'un texte sans en limiter la portée à des connaissances historiques ou littéraires, en ce qu'il conteste la prétention revendiquée par la méthodologie scientifique de régler la connaissance de l'expérience que l'homme fait du monde, en ce qu'il subordonne le chemin du comprendre à la nature de l'objet qu'il vise. Ces positions de principe sont documentées dans la préface de la deuxième édition du *Römerbrief*. Elles invitent à dépasser le peu d'ambition des exégètes historico-critiques afin de mener la « volonté tenace de comprendre et d'expliquer » jusqu'à « repenser » le texte de Paul, c'est-à-dire où « je suis près d'oublier que je ne suis pas

¹⁸ Voir la lettre ouverte de Barth au professeur Adolf von Harnack: Karl Barth, « An Prof. Dr. Adolf von Harnack, Berlin, 1923 (zwei Briefe) » in *Offene Briefe, 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch, Gesamtausgabe V.35 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), 67–68.

¹⁹ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 499 (trad. modifiée).

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Vérité et méthode. Les grandes lignes d'une herméneutique philosophique*, trad. Pierre Fruchon, Jean Grondin et Gilbert Merlio (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 290.

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, « Hermeneutik und Historismus », in *Gesammelte Werke*, t. 2, Hermeneutik, vol. II, *Wahrheit und Methode. Ergänzungen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 391.

l'auteur, où je suis près de l'avoir compris si bien, que je puis le laisser parler en mon nom et parler, moi-même, en son nom».²²

L'historicisme pare d'un vernis de scientificité un renoncement à comprendre. Barth anticipe ainsi un certain nombre d'intuitions que Gadamer développera dans le sillage de l'existential de la compréhension chez Heidegger, tel le cercle herméneutique : aucune méthode ne mène d'elle-même à la vérité, s'agissant de significations relevant de l'expérience du monde; la compréhension est pour les sciences humaines le lieu de la vérité où l'on pénètre, non en s'excluant en tant qu'interprète par une idée ingénue de l'objectivité, mais en assumant le risque de l'interprétation à la première personne, par essais et corrections ; quand il s'agit d'un texte, il ne convient pas de le déposséder de sa prétention à dire quelque chose de vrai, ce qui est le péché de l'historicisme, mais il convient plutôt d'entendre ce qui est dit dans sa signification pour la vie présente de l'interprète ; cette recherche s'opère dans le cadre d'un dialogue sur le fil d'une tradition entre passé et présent.²³

La vérité par-delà la méthode, la vérité à chercher dans le lieu de la compréhension, pour Barth comme pour Gadamer. C'est le sens de ce que Barth annonce explicitement dans la préface de la première édition du *Römerbrief* :

[...] s'il fallait choisir entre elle [l'exégèse historico-critique] et la théorie ancienne de l'inspiration, je recourrais résolument à cette dernière : c'est elle qui a la justification la plus grande, la plus profonde, la *plus importante*, car elle tend, elle-même, vers l'œuvre de compréhension, œuvre sans laquelle tous les préparatifs à cet effet sont sans valeur. Je suis heureux de ne pas être obligé de choisir entre elles.²⁴

«S'occuper de ses affaires», voilà ce qui aux yeux de Barth est pour la théologie l'apologétique la plus sûre. Il prévoit que le contenu de son livre est à même d'intéresser des non-théologiens dans la conviction que «sa question est la question de chacun».²⁵ D'elle-même, dans la mesure où elle s'est connectée sur son objet, la théologie est appelée à faire retentir sa voix dans la culture et la société.

22 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 16.

23 Pour ce dernier point, voir Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains* : «Comprendre l'histoire est un entretien continu, toujours plus sincère et plus pénétrant, entre la sagesse d'hier et celle de demain, qui sont une seule et même sagesse», 9.

24 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 9.

25 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 12 : «[...] le moment, du reste, où nous autres, théologiens, nous suscitions le plus l'intérêt des laïques, c'est lorsque nous nous adressons le moins expressément et le moins intentionnellement à eux et que, au contraire, nous vivons tout simplement notre affaire, comme le fait tout honnête artisan».

2.3 L'audace prophétique (volet apologétique)

L'attitude biblique adoptée par Barth dès le *Römerbrief*, consistant à prendre l'Écriture comme lieu théologique par excellence, ne vise pas seulement l'examen critique de la doctrine chrétienne. Elle le conduit à penser le temps qu'il vit et à juger ce qui arrive. Non pas en revendiquant de droit une place pour la théologie dans le monde du savoir et de la culture, au risque de reconduire la confusion de la théologie libérale, mais en assumant pleinement l'extériorité de la parole dont la théologie se fait l'écho et par laquelle elle tente de comprendre ce qui arrive : « nous tous, nous avons *oublié* le Dieu inconnu ». ²⁶ Il ne s'agit d'une connaissance, bien rangée à côté d'autres connaissances, mais « l'impossible possibilité de Dieu » ²⁷ et la théologie n'est pas une science à côté des autres sciences, mais celle qui les menace toutes. La théologie ne peut revendiquer de place allant de soi dans la culture ou l'université. Commentant la « hardiesse », revendiquée par Paul à la fin de son épître (Rm 15,15), qui le fait porter la bonne nouvelle du salut, Barth soutient que la théologie ne tient sa place dans l'université ni du ministère de l'Église ni de sa dépendance à la science historique, mais d'un coup de force et d'un acte d'audace :

Théologie scientifique veut dire repentance, transformation de la pensée, « renouvellement de la pensée » (Rm 12,2 ; remarquer les précautions avec lesquelles cette notion est garantie en ce passage). Elle est le point d'interrogation et le point d'exclamation à la lisière extrême de l'Université (points que, sincèrement, tout homme intelligent doit, d'une manière ou d'une autre, poser à cet endroit !), de même que l'Église, dans le même rôle, doit mener, d'une façon générale, son existence nécessaire à la lisière extrême de la culture humaine. ²⁸

De ce lieu instable où Barth situe la théologie, il pose dans le *Römerbrief* un geste qui transgresse la disqualification moderne de la connaissance théologique, réduite à sa portée morale ou à une utilité pratique, voire à une fonction pédagogique. Pour faire droit à l'ambition du geste barthien du *Römerbrief*, on peut faire l'hypothèse qu'il est une réaction au mouvement des Lumières radicales, inauguré par Spinoza, qui a conduit la théologie à se laisser déterminer par des facteurs externes et à subir l'intimidation des diktats de la théorie de la connaissance issue d'une extension de la méthodologie scientifique et de sa théorie de la connaissance à tout l'ordre du pensable. ²⁹ L'une de ces exigences

²⁶ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 497.

²⁷ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 498.

²⁸ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 499.

²⁹ Baruch Spinoza, *Traité théologico-politique*, trad. Émile Saisset, préf. Thomas Römer (Saint-Martin-de-Londres: H&O éditions, 2018). Sur les Lumières radicales, voir Jonathan I. Israel, *Les*

est précisément la critique biblique, non du point de vue des droits légitimes de la critique, mais dans le discrédit de la théologie auquel l'établissement de la critique dans ses droits devait bientôt aboutir.³⁰ Sous l'effet de cette marginalisation, la théologie a été tentée de se dessaisir elle-même de son discours propre par un oubli de son objet, dont Barth estime que la théologie porte elle-même la responsabilité ; en satisfaisant aux réquisits de l'histoire et des autres sciences humaines florissantes, elle a été tentée de se démettre de son registre de connaissance, de sa liberté d'interprétation et de la nécessaire audace qu'il lui revenait d'exercer. La théologie s'est ainsi laissée aimer par l'affirmation moderne de la toute-puissance humaine, sous plusieurs aspects : elle est devenue une affaire de politique interne relevant de l'État ou encore le problème intérieur des individus, elle a été réduite à une morale, à une science ou à une philosophie.³¹

Penser avec la Bible. Le geste barthien du *Römerbrief* a été caractérisé, en premier lieu, comme le recouvrement par la théologie de son acte fondamental, l'inscrivant de nouveau dans la visée de son objet le plus propre, depuis un lieu d'impulsion intérieure, l'Écriture lue en dialogue avec la tradition, en prise avec le mouvement de la pensée et capable d'initier elle-même une nouvelle trajectoire de pensée. En second lieu, sur un plan épistémologique, c'est par une réflexion sur ce que comprendre veut dire – un comprendre vital pour la foi –, que Barth a transgressé les interdits de la critique qui ont longtemps inhibé la théologie dans sa liberté d'interpréter. En troisième lieu, l'ambition de ce geste de « penser avec la Bible » a été saisie en réponse à la destitution culturelle et intellectuelle dont la théologie n'avait guère pris conscience depuis le tournant spinoziste : même si la doctrine du *Römerbrief* n'est pas tout à fait chrétienne (faute de voir en Jésus l'union du divin et de l'humain plutôt que « le point de la

Lumières radicales. La philosophie, Spinoza et la naissance de la modernité (1650–1750) (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2005) ainsi que François Laplanche, «Compte rendu de J. Israël, *Les Lumières radicales*», *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (1/2007) : 128–31, et Antoine Lilti, «Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières ? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie», *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 64 (2009): 171–206, à qui l'on doit cette définition : «les Lumières radicales se définissent par leur hostilité à tout compromis entre la philosophie et la religion, par un matérialisme intransigeant fondé sur la thèse spinoziste de l'unité de la substance, par leur vision purement rationaliste et mathématisée du monde, par des convictions républicaines et démocratiques, et enfin par le refus des inégalités, que celles-ci soient sociales, de race, ou de genre», 176.

30 Comme l'écrit Thomas Römer : «On peut, sans exagération, considérer Spinoza comme l'inventeur de l'exégèse historico-critique», dans Spinoza, *Traité théologico-politique*, préface, 7.

31 Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 27–65.

ligne de fracture»³² entre deux mondes), le geste théologique et intellectuel qu'il représente signifie que le temps de l'offensive est venu pour la théologie, et que ce geste ne consiste pas à dépendre de facteurs externes mais à en revenir au cœur de sa logique et à réapprendre à «penser avec la Bible» : se mesurer au texte biblique, et mesurer toutes choses, philosophie inclusivement, à l'aune de son objet. Quelle actualité à ce geste sur ces trois registres respectivement théologique, épistémologique et culturel ?

3 La Bible pour penser : actualité du *Römerbrief*

Un siècle après le *Römerbrief*, comment la théologie peut renouer avec une impulsion intérieure capable de susciter sa créativité, avec un courage pour l'objectivité à même d'irriguer sa réflexion critique et avec une audace prophétique propre à ranimer sa force de proposition ? Les limites assignées à cette contribution recommandent de donner à ces propositions un caractère programmatique.

3.1 La voie d'une théologie biblique (volet herméneutique)

Pour la théologie en manque d'unité organique entre ses disciplines, faute d'une vision unitaire de l'acte théologique, Barth établit dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* un rapport valide entre exégèse et dogmatique, en ce qu'il respecte la spécificité des deux disciplines tout en organisant entre elles une conversation continue.³³ Alors que les études bibliques, accaparées par la technicité, la spécialisation et la complexité de leur tâche, sont exposées à la tentation d'esquiver la problématique théologique, et que de son côté, la théologie systématique risque de s'égarer dans des questions intellectuelles sans portée pratique, il convient d'établir entre exégèse et dogmatique un dialogue qui satisfasse aux exigences critiques de la première et qui comble l'aspiration spéculative de la seconde. Pas d'autre voie possible si l'on veut aboutir à des propositions originales portant au langage la Bonne nouvelle d'une manière qui reflète l'actualité de la parole de

³² Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 37 (trad. modifiée).

³³ Voir Benoît Bourguin, *L'Herméneutique théologique de Karl Barth : Exégèse et dogmatique dans le quatrième volume de la Kirchliche Dogmatik*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 171 (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), et récemment Gerhard Bergner, *Um der Sache willen. Karl Barths Schriftauslegung in der Kirchlichen Dogmatik*, Forschungen zur systematischen und ökumenischen Theologie 148 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015).

Dieu à l'œuvre aujourd'hui. Cela suppose de convaincre les exégètes que le mouvement de compréhension ne s'arrête pas au «respect de l'histoire» ou, pourrait-on ajouter, au «respect de la lettre» envisagé sous la formalité des différentes méthodes en vigueur : expliquer et comprendre suppose de rapporter le texte biblique à ce dont il parle ; ce qui renvoie à la problématique théologique. Cela suppose de convaincre les dogmaticiens qu'aucun renouveau de la théologie ne peut se dispenser d'examiner à nouveaux frais le rapport aux fondements scripturaires.

Soutenir la nécessité d'une conversation continue entre exégètes et dogmaticiens, c'est contribuer à ce que la théologie recouvre son unité et l'intégrité de l'acte fondamental qui la constitue, c'est lui donner d'accomplir l'arc entier de l'interprétation entre explication et application, permettant de la sorte de restituer à l'événement de la compréhension sa densité théologique et sa fécondité pratique.³⁴

Entre acribie exégétique et discernement des signes des temps où vit le destinataire de la Parole, c'est la vision unitaire et différenciée, étant sauve l'autonomie des diverses disciplines, qui est à même de rendre la théologie à son «impulsion intérieure [...] propre» (*eigene, innere Bewegung*).³⁵ Un exemple parmi d'autres : apprendre que les écrivains bibliques empruntent au domaine du droit international, rationalité hétérogène à la théologie, la notion d'alliance est de nature à convaincre un théologien timoré de recouvrer l'audace d'interpréter à l'aune de l'Évangile les réalités de son temps, en rencontrant d'autres raisons avec lesquelles il convient de dialoguer. N'est-ce pas de cette audace, analogue à celle des écrivains bibliques, dont Barth a fait preuve dans le *Römerbrief* ? Le manifeste herméneutique du *Römerbrief*, assorti de la lumineuse herméneutique gadamérienne, n'a pas encore livré tout son potentiel de renouveau pour la théologie.

³⁴ C'est le propos de l'essai suivant : Benoît Bourguine, *Bible oblige. Essai sur la théologie biblique*. Cogitatio Fidei 308 (Paris : Cerf, 2019). Le projet est présenté dans un article : Benoît Bourguine, «Pour une théologie biblique», *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuse* 99 (2019): 209 – 230.

³⁵ Barth, *La Théologie protestante*, 75.

3.2 L'errance des sciences sociales et humaines (volet épistémologique)

À quoi pourrait ressembler aujourd'hui le «courage de l'objectivité»³⁶ ? Elle serait probablement dans une critique implacable de l'ingérence de la politique des identités dans la recherche universitaire.³⁷

L'actualité des sciences sociales et humaines, tant en Europe que dans l'influent monde universitaire anglo-saxon, est de nature à donner à la leçon barthienne consistant pour chaque discipline à s'occuper de sa «chose», conformément à sa formalité, son champ et ses procédures de validation, une portée critique inestimable. Les humanités et les sciences sociales anglo-saxonnes, si influentes pour les autres aires académiques, subissent en effet une offensive sans précédent de la part des «*Grievance Studies*», issues des revendications de groupes de pression organisés selon une logique victimaire orientée vers un retournement de la domination subie. *Gender Studies*, *Feminist Studies*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *White Studies*, *Fat Studies* (liste non exhaustive) courent le risque, désormais avéré,³⁸ d'obéir à des logiques militantes de justice sociale en exposant dangereusement la rigueur de leur recherche universitaire. Savant ou militant, vérité ou justice, il faut choisir. L'activisme de ces départements de sciences sociales est tel qu'il menace la liberté d'expression : il n'est pas rare que dans les campus américains, voire européens, les orateurs jugés par trop critiques de la cause défendue soient désinvités. L'éthique de la discussion et les vertus du débat contradictoire sont les premières victimes d'un activisme qui menace l'intégrité de la recherche universitaire.

Le diagnostic que pose Barth sur la théologie depuis le tournant des Lumières mérite d'être rappelé dans ce contexte : en déficit de prestige, la théologie, au lieu de se centrer sur son objet, a déployé son énergie à correspondre au tournant anthropologique de la modernité radicale en cédant sur la transcendence du Dieu Tout-Autre. Le diagnostic qu'il pose sur la théologie libérale

³⁶ Barth, «An Prof. Dr. Adolf von Harnack», 67–68

³⁷ Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds. Gender, Race and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

³⁸ On fait allusion aux *hoax studies*, études intentionnellement falsifiées, de Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay et Peter Boghossian qui ont obtenu pour sept d'entre elles une approbation des comités de lecture des revues les plus prestigieuses dans le domaine des *Gender Studies* (*Gender, Place & Culture*), *Feminist Studies* (*Hypatia*, *Affilia*) et *Fat Studies* (*Fat Studies*). Le sérieux de ces *grievance studies* est clairement mis en cause. Voir aussi : Helen Pluckrose, James A. Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020).

est du même ordre. De la même manière, on peut se demander si le déficit de prestige des sciences humaines et sociales vis-à-vis des sciences naturelles n'explique pas le choix (ruineux) pour ces sciences humaines et sociales de se mettre à la remorque de facteurs extérieurs en épousant les revendications de luttes sociales dans le but de résister à leur propre marginalisation. En prétendant soutenir ces luttes, ces académiques subordonnent leur intégrité scientifique à des causes, dont la logique ne peut que contrarier l'indispensable distanciation des méthodes critiques. C'est en revenant à l'objet social et humain qui est le leur, ainsi qu'à la recherche d'une connaissance proportionnée à cet objet, que ces disciplines pourront satisfaire à l'éthique de la recherche. C'est en se tenant à la spécificité de leur champ et en obéissant à sa logique qu'ils peuvent recouvrer à la fois objectivité et scientificité.³⁹

Cette problématique qui revêt un certain caractère d'urgence renvoie au questionnement de la préface à la deuxième édition du *Römerbrief* relatif à la compréhension et l'explication. On peut penser que le point de vue épistémologique défendu par Barth se trouve fondé, théorisé et élargi par Gadamer aux dimensions d'une herméneutique des sciences humaines, qui est de nature à offrir à ces sciences la conscience de leur scientificité et les coordonnées de leur objectivité, pour leur éviter de céder à l'intimidation des sciences naturelles – on évoque ici la propension d'auteurs, qui s'est notamment vérifiée chez Bultmann, à soumettre la théologie aux conditions de validité d'autres disciplines ; propension qui conduit plus largement certaines sciences humaines à se soumettre à une méthode mimant celle des sciences naturelles, comme le fait d'habiller son propos d'enquêtes empiriques et d'études statistiques en espérant y trouver un vernis de scientificité. Seule une authentique problématisation obéissant aux critères d'une discipline donnée peut en satisfaire les réquisits. La théologie ne manque pas de ressources réflexives, s'agissant de la nécessaire distanciation vis-à-vis de la conviction et de l'engagement dans l'élaboration de la connaissance ; depuis l'expérience qui est la sienne, elle peut contribuer à décrire la corruption toujours possible de la recherche par des chercheurs avant tout préoccupés de faire prévaloir leurs propres présupposés. Quant à Gadamer, l'élucidation des conditions historiques et langagières de l'événement de compréhension par l'interprète, par-delà la naïveté de l'historicisme et du positivisme, répond à l'essentiel des questions posées par l'état actuel des sciences humaines et sociales, empêtrées dans des combats militants.

39 «Scientificité signifie objectivité». Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 499 (trad. modifiée).

3.3 La sagesse d'une anthropologie évangélique (volet apologétique)

Le geste théologique et herméneutique du « penser avec la Bible » de Barth dans le *Römerbrief* n'indique pas à la théologie un positionnement doctrinal équilibré, comme il le reconnaîtra plus tard tout en s'attelant à la rédaction de la *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, mais il signifie bien plutôt l'audace nécessaire à la théologie pour occuper sa place dans le concert des rationalités et le mouvement des idées. Quelle actualité donner à cette hardiesse indispensable ? Après la dimension herméneutique et épistémologique de la théologie fondamentale, il convient ici d'aborder le dialogue de la théologie avec les autres disciplines scientifiques et les autres sphères d'activité humaine ; il convient également d'interroger sa force de proposition dans la culture de son temps.

Pour mesurer la portée du positionnement culturel assumé par Barth, on a fait allusion plus haut aux Lumières radicales initiées par Spinoza vis-à-vis desquelles le *Römerbrief* ose mener l'offensive, à la différence de la théologie du XVIII^e siècle qui a, au jugement de Barth, épousé servilement le mouvement des idées plutôt que de s'en remettre à son impulsion intérieure. Les Lumières radicales ont, avec bien d'autres facteurs, contribué à poser les fondements de l'humanisme exclusif de transcendance qui constitue aujourd'hui en Occident l'anthropologie par défaut. Des auteurs ont à bon droit soutenu que les progrès du déisme, de l'athéisme et de l'indifférentisme ne sont pas dissociables de l'autonomie de la raison, prônée par la théologie chrétienne, menant ainsi à la reconnaissance d'une pleine légitimité de la science, de la démocratie et du pluralisme des convictions. La Cité moderne vit *etsi deus non daretur* et la théologie le veut avec elle et pour elle.

Pourtant l'humanisme autoréférentiel de nos sociétés trahit une perte d'orientation et cache mal un déficit de substance. Quelle anthropologie théologique proposer à un humanisme manifestement démuné face aux défis qui en décomposent les fondements ? Faute de sources symboliques, religieuses ou sapientielles, susceptibles d'ordonner une action collective et de fonder une normativité éthique, l'humanisme séculier s'autojustifie en délivrant de nouveaux droits subjectifs et sape au même rythme les réquisits de la vie en commun. Le moment est sans doute venu pour la théologie contemporaine d'élaborer à nouveaux frais une anthropologie évangélique arrimée à une théologie de la création et à une théologie de la grâce.

Le cahier des charges d'une *théologie de la création* est d'instituer l'homme dans une dépendance à son Créateur et simultanément dans les droits subjectifs de sa liberté la plus propre, de manière à conjuguer l'*ouverture* sapientielle de l'homme à son *origine* avec la responsabilité d'une *destinée* singulière, qui ho-

nore toutes les dimensions de l'invention chrétienne de la *liberté*. On peut attendre d'une théologie de la création qu'elle inspire une conception de la *personne* qui exorcise le sortilège d'une autoréférentialité suicidaire et qu'elle propose une vision de la société exaltant la mise au service de chacun au bien commun. L'absolu d'une transcendance qui appelle à sortir de soi et oriente au-delà de soi interdit de confondre l'autonomie d'un sujet, libre de son destin, avec l'avidité égoïste d'un auto-accomplissement solitaire et vide de sens. Seule la position d'une puissance créatrice et paternelle peut dégager l'espace d'une *fraternité* et indiquer la bonté d'une vie commune pleine de saveur.

Le cahier des charges d'une *théologie de la grâce*, à distance de la solution suarézienne tentée de clore l'homme sur lui-même par l'hypothèse périlleuse d'une nature pure, est de manifester la surabondance du don de Dieu en Jésus-Christ comme la proposition d'une *relation* qui se signale par sa *gratuité* où Dieu apparaît dans son *altérité*. La malédiction d'une existence humaine solipsiste et vide de sens est déjouée par la visite gracieuse du Sauveur. Le cercle vicieux du péché et de la mort est brisé par l'*action victorieuse* du Père dans la résurrection du Fils, à la puissance de laquelle les baptisés sont associés par la communication de la vie nouvelle dans l'Esprit ; et ils sont ainsi rendus participants de la grâce qui les fait vivre non pour eux-mêmes, mais pour celui qui est mort et ressuscité pour eux (cf. 2 Co 5,15). La théologie de la grâce signifie de quelle bénédiction est revêtue une vie de foi, d'amour et d'espérance au service de Dieu et du prochain. «Et l'espérance ne déçoit pas car l'amour de Dieu a été répandu dans nos cœurs par l'Esprit Saint qui nous a été donné» (Rm 5,5).

Andreas Dettwiler

Abraham als Glaubensparadigma nach Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* (Röm 4)

Sein eigentliches Thema ist Gott selbst.
(Michael Wolter, zu Röm 4)

Abstract: Barth understood his study of the letter to the Romans as a conversation *with* Paul about God. What then can be said of Barth's understanding of the so-called Abraham chapter in Rom 4? According to Barth, Abraham – as a historical figure or not – is only interesting insofar as he points to something that ultimately remains elusive to any historical inquiry, because it concerns the human being's position before God. Faith is certainly crucial in this respect, and should not be misunderstood as a human achievement. It can ultimately only be apprehended in a highly paradoxical way as an “empty space” (*Hohlraum*). Barth's interpretation and recent exegetical studies converge surprisingly on this point: The central theme of Rom 4 is not Abraham as such, or the Pauline understanding of “salvation history,” or the conditions of possibility of the Pauline mission towards the nations, but rather the question of *God*. The present contribution concludes by considering the relevance of Barth's interpretation for contemporary exegesis.

1 Mit Paulus das «Gespräch über Gott» riskieren – zur Hermeneutik von Barth

Barth hat in seinem *Römerbrief* sein Buch verschiedentlich ein Gespräch genannt.¹ In seinem berühmten Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage hält er programmatisch fest: «Dieses Buch will nichts anderes sein als ein Stück des Gesprächs eines Theologen mit Theologen».² Gegen Ende seiner Kommentierung kommt Barth in der zweiten Auflage nochmals auf diese Bezeichnung zurück, so etwa in seiner

1 Zum hermeneutischen Ansatz des jungen Barth siehe die wertvolle Studie von Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, WUNT 2/145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

2 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung)* 1922, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi und Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 8. Die Erstauflage von 1919 wird ebenfalls nach dem Text der Gesamtausgabe zitiert: Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung)* 1919, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985).

eindringlichen Auslegung des Gebots der Nächstenliebe (Röm 13,8–9),³ dann vor allem in seinen einleitenden Ausführungen zur Paulusparänese von Röm 14–15 (überschrieben mit «Die Krisis des freien Lebensversuchs»), bei der Barth dem Leser, der Leserin, sein hermeneutisches Programm nochmals vor Augen führt. So schreibt er etwa: «Als die *Freiheit Gottes* haben wir diesen immer nahen, immer fernen Blickpunkt unsres Gesprächs des öftern bezeichnet und umschrieben»,⁴ um anschliessend den Römerbrief des Paulus als «*Redeversuch*»⁵ zu qualifizieren. Zwei Seiten später greift Barth die an die «Starken» der Gemeinde Roms gerichtete Ermahnung des Paulus auf,⁶ um in grundsätzlicher Weise die vermeintliche Sicherheit des Paulusinterpreten – und also auch der von Barth selbst vorgeschlagenen Interpretation des Römerbriefs! – in dialektischer Zuspitzung noch ein letztes Mal zu problematisieren:

Denn wenn der Römerbrief zum Schluss sich selbst aufhebt, indem er ausgerechnet gerade den Verständigen, den Empfänglichen, den prädisponierten Paulinern unter seinen Lesern ein ausdrückliches Halt! entgegenstellt, so bewährt er gerade *damit* und *nur* damit sich selbst. Und es ist die Probe aufs Exempel für jeden Leser, ob er es erträgt, sich durch diese Warnung noch einmal Alles, was er begriffen und ergriffen zu haben glaubt, aus den Händen winden zu lassen. [...] Nur aufs Neue werden wir am Ausgang des Römerbriefs (wie etwa auch am Ausgang der Romane Dostojewskis) vor die undurchdringliche Problematik des Lebens [...] gestellt, auf dass wir *keinen* Ausgang finden, sondern erst recht wieder von vorne anfangen, nur immer neu die Bedrängnis sehen sollen, in die uns unser Gespräch über Gott gedrängt hat.⁷

Schliesslich hält er – diesmal zu Röm 15,14 – noch einmal fest:

Der Römerbrief [des Paulus] [...] erhebt nicht den Anspruch, originell, tief oder geistreich zu sein, er lässt sich aber mit seinem wirklichen Anspruch auch nicht unter diesem Vorwand abweisen. Er ist keine Dogmatik, es dürfte ihm aber eben darum auch nicht mit antidogmatischen Tiraden zu antworten und beizukommen sein. Er proklamiert nicht die Autorität

3 «Hier muss es sich entscheiden, ob die unmögliche Möglichkeit Gottes jenseits der menschlichen Möglichkeiten, auf die wir im Lauf unsres Gesprächs über Gott immer wieder gestoßen, nicht doch ein metaphysisches Gespenst ist, ob wir nicht doch geträumt haben, indem wir die psychologische Voraus-Setzung, die Ausgießung der Liebe zu Gott in unsere Herzen behaupteten, [...] ob unser Verständnis Gottes nicht doch ein 'Verständnis auf Abstand' (Kierkegaard) war oder ob der unbekannte Gott wirklich zu uns geredet hat in Jesus Christus». Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 659–60.

4 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 671.

5 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 671.

6 Röm 15,1: «Wir, die Starken, sind verpflichtet, die Schwächen der Schwachen zu tragen und nicht uns selbst zu Gefallen zu leben», Übers. Neue Zürcher Bibel 2007 (im folgenden NZB).

7 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 674.

des Paulus, er ist aber auch nicht zu erledigen durch die Entdeckung, dass dies Alles eben doch im besten Fall nur – Paulus sei; denn dass Paulus nicht Christus ist, das ist eine gänzlich banale und eindrucklose Wahrheit; Christus steht in *keinem* Buche, und an den zu 'glauben', der den Römerbrief schrieb, oder an das, was er schrieb, das kommt keinen Augenblick in Frage; man kann nur an *Gott* glauben! Eben das ist die These des Römerbriefs, die These des 'Paulinismus', mit der er sich selbst aufhebt, lange bevor seine Widersacher zu ihren ängstlichen Warnungen auch nur den Atem gefunden haben.⁸

Diese und andere Stellen machen deutlich, wie Barth sich dieses «Gespräch über Gott» konkret vorstellt:⁹ nicht primär als Gespräch eines Exegeten mit anderen Exegeten *über* Paulus, sondern als Gespräch eines Theologen (Barth) *mit* einem anderen Theologen (Paulus) *über* *Gott*.¹⁰ Es ist dieser Ansatz, der Barth zur kühnen Aussage verleitet, «das Wort in den Wörtern [des Römerbriefs des Paulus] aufzudecken: «Bis zu dem Punkt muss ich als Verstehender vorstossen, wo ich nahezu nur noch vor dem Rätsel der *Sache*, nahezu nicht mehr vor dem Rätsel der *Urkunde* als solcher stehe, wo ich es also nahezu vergesse, dass ich nicht der Autor bin, wo ich ihn nahezu so gut verstanden habe, dass ich ihn in meinem Namen reden lassen und selber in seinem Namen reden kann».¹¹

Vorausgesetzt ist dabei zum einen stillschweigend, dass der Gesprächspartner Paulus nicht als historisch-individuelle Grösse – sei es seine psychische Verfasstheit oder auch seine kulturelle, religiöse oder anderweitige Prägung – interessant ist. Gegen Ende seiner Ausführungen kann Barth ganz schroff zum Selbstbewusstsein des «historischen» Paulus sagen:¹²

8 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 701.

9 Barth will dieses «Gespräch» auf seine beiden Römerbriefkommentare von 1919 und 1922 bezogen sein, wie die einleitende Notiz im Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage deutlich macht: «Wichtiger sind mir einige grundsätzliche Dinge, die *das beiden Auflagen Gemeinsame* betreffen» (Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 8, kursiv von mir).

10 Eine gute Illustration hierzu bietet eine bemerkenswerte Passage im Brief von Barth an Paul Wernle vom 24. Oktober 1919, in dem Barth auf die Rezension des Basler Kirchenhistorikers zur Erstfassung des *Römerbriefs* reagiert und sich dabei schroff von der zeitgenössischen «Fakultätstheologie» absetzt: «Nicht die Kritik werfen wir ihnen vor, sondern den Mangel an Kritik gegenüber dem gestaltlosen Trümmerhaufen von einzelnen relativen Wahrheiten, die Sie uns als Resultat der wissenschaftlichen Arbeit am Neuen Testament darbieten [...] ich [bin] dann auf vielen Umwegen zu meiner Römerbriefarbeit gekommen, deren Wesen für mich gerade in dem lag, was Sie mir offenbar zum Vorwurf machen: dass ich versuchte, statt über Paulus allerhand zu erfahren und zu wissen, mit Paulus zu *denken*. Ich würde an Plato ganz im gleichen Sinn herantreten». Edition des Briefes in Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 638–46, 644.

11 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 14.

12 Wie es etwa in Röm 15,17–21 aufblitzt: «So habe ich nun meinen Ruhm (καύχησιν), im Christus Jesus, vor Gott nämlich [...]», Übers. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 707.

sollte etwa der paulinische 'Ruhm' [cf. Röm 15,17], das Selbstbewusstsein, in dem hier geschrieben ist, einen Schatten auf den Inhalt des Römerbriefs werfen, einen Vorwand, ihm auszuweichen, bieten? Ja, es ist ein Selbstbewusstsein, das aus diesen Blättern redet. Es fragt sich nur: *wessen* Selbstbewusstsein? Das des *Paulus*? Sicher auch, wie sollte es anders sein, dass da, wo ein *Mensch* von Gott redet [...], auch dieses *Menschen* Selbstbewusstsein ausgiebig und störend genug zu Worte kommt? [...] Wer ist Paulus? Paulus ist preiszugeben. Die Höhe, auf der Paulus etwa stehen mag, ist nicht allzu beträchtlich. Was Paulus 'erfahren' hat, weiß, sagt und vollbracht hat, davon 'werde ich mich nicht unterstehen zu reden' [Röm 15,18]. Paulus ist nichts. Aber vielleicht ist Paulus gerade von dort aus so gefährlich [...].¹³

Vorausgesetzt ist dabei zum anderen, dass dieses «Gespräch über Gott», das Barth in seiner Auslegung des Römerbriefs vorschlägt, ein höchst risikobehaftetes und ernstes, eigentlich unmögliches und doch notwendiges Unternehmen darstellt. Barth ist sich dessen bewusst, wenn er reichlich polemisch der exegetischen Zunft seiner Zeit vorhält: «An der Grenze der Häresie hat sich der Paulinismus immer befunden, und man muss sich nur wundern darüber, was für absolut harmlose und unanständige Bücher die meisten Römerbriefkommentare und andere Paulusbücher sind».¹⁴ Und ein paar Zeilen weiter fordert Barth seine Leserinnen und Leser dazu auf, «das Buch sehr vorsichtig zu lesen, nicht zu schnell, nicht ohne mein Vorgehen am griechischen Text und an andern Kommentaren zu kontrollieren, und bitte, lieber nicht 'begeistert': Es handelt sich um ernste und in prägnantem Sinn kritische Arbeit, die hier zu tun ist».¹⁵

Auch ich möchte mich nun am Gespräch mit Barth und Paulus «über Gott» beteiligen. Als Interpret der neutestamentlichen Texte, der weniger bei Barth als vielmehr bei Bultmann, Bonhoeffer und Jüngel in die Schule gegangen ist, scheint es mir angebracht, eher in der zweiten Reihe Platz zu nehmen. Meine Fragestellung ist folgende: Wie nehme ich als heutiger Exeget die Interpretation Barths wahr? Wo und wie kann die Interpretation Barths mit der gegenwärtigen Exegese des Römerbriefs in Beziehung gesetzt werden? Es geht mir dabei nicht darum, in einem schulmeisterlichen Sinne Punkte zu verteilen und zu fragen, wo er richtig und wo er falsch lag. Ich möchte Barth vielmehr als *Gesprächspartner* über die Zeiten hinweg ernstnehmen, indem ich frage: Wo ist seine Exegese – Barth wollte *auch* als Exeget ernstgenommen werden – mit heutigen Verstehensbemühungen in vielleicht überraschender Weise kongruent? Und wo könnte Barth eventuell sogar neue Impulse für die heutige exegetische Arbeit geben? Als Untersu-

¹³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 707.

¹⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 20.

¹⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 21.

chungsgegenstand wähle ich das sogenannte *Abrahamkapitel von Röm 4*, wobei ich vorrangig die Zweitausgabe von 1922 berücksichtigen werde.

Wie schon die Überschriften – der ersten, dann aber vor allem der zweiten Auflage – deutlich machen, spielt Röm 4 für das Barthsche Verständnis des paulinischen *Glaubensbegriffs* eine zentrale Rolle.¹⁶ Gleichzeitig ist deutlich, dass Barth auch in Röm 4 seinen streng *theozentrischen* Akzent konsequent weiterführt. In diesem Punkt trifft sich das Anliegen von Barth mit einer wichtigen Linie der heutigen Römerbriefexegese, wonach das eigentliche Thema von Röm 4 nicht Abraham als solcher oder das paulinische Verständnis der «Heilsgeschichte» oder die Bedingungen der Möglichkeit der paulinischen Völkermission, sondern «Gott selbst» sei.¹⁷ Ich möchte versuchen, diese beiden Ansätze ins Gespräch miteinander zu bringen.

2 Gott als zentraler «Gegenstand» der paulinischen Ausführung zu Abraham

Bevor wir uns die Interpretation Barths von Röm 4 näher anschauen, möchte ich mein eigenes Verständnis dieses Kapitels knapp skizzieren. Röm 4 schliesst nahtlos an die vorausgehenden Ausführungen zur Rechtfertigung des Menschen aus Glauben (Röm 1,16–17 und 3,21–31) an, nimmt aber auch Motive und Begriffe aus Röm 1,18–3,20 auf. Röm 3,31 – «Setzen wir nun durch den Glauben das Gesetz

16 In der ersten Auflage gibt Barth Röm 4 den Titel «Die Stimme der Bibel» (*Der Römerbrief 1919*, 106), dann die folgenden Untertitel: «Gott und der Heros» (Röm 4,1–8); «Der Glaube und die Religion» (Röm 4,9–12); «Die Gerechtigkeit und die Moral» (Röm 4,13–22); «Die Historie» (Röm 4,23–25). Für die zweite Ausgabe wählt Barth den Titel «Die Stimme der Geschichte» (*Der Römerbrief 1922*, 160), dann als Untertitel: «Glaube ist Wunder» (Röm 3,31–4,8); «Glaube ist Anfang» (Röm 4,9–12); «Glaube ist Schöpfung» (Röm 4,13–17a); «Vom Nutzen der Historie» (Röm 4,17b–25). Nur nebenbei bemerkt: Exegetisch ist bei diesem Strukturvorschlag von 1922 bedenkenswert, dass Barth Röm 3,31 nicht als Abschluss von Röm 3,21–30, sondern als Einleitung zu Röm 4,1–25 sieht.

17 Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8*, EKK 6/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener; Ostfildern: Patmos, 2014): «Sein eigentliches Thema [i. e. dasjenige von Röm 4] ist Gott selbst. Paulus will durch Abraham zeigen, wie es 'bei Gott' (V. 2c) zugeht: dass Gott schon immer und niemals anders gerechtfertigt hat und rechtfertigen wird als aufgrund des Glaubens [...] Das Kontinuum, durch das Paulus die Christen mit Abraham verbunden sieht [vgl. Röm 4,23–25], ist aus diesem Grund Gott und die Selbigkeit der Prinzipien seines rechtfertigenden Handelns» (315). Wolter nimmt hier die These auf, die Jochen Flebbe in seiner Bonner Dissertation detailliert begründet hat: *Solus Deus: Untersuchungen zur Rede von Gott im Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, BZNW 158 (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2008), insb. 163–267.

ausser Kraft? Natürlich nicht! wir halten vielmehr am Gesetz fest»¹⁸ – hat dabei nicht nur die Funktion, den Gedankengang von 3,21–30 abzurunden, sondern auch, wie Barth in der Zweitaufgabe von 1922 richtig gesehen hat, zum Abrahamkapitel überzuleiten: Das Beispiel Abrahams soll zeigen, dass die in Röm 3,21–31 postulierte These der Rechtfertigung aus Glauben dem «Gesetz»¹⁹ nicht widerspricht, sondern ihm im Gegenteil entspricht. Nach Paulus steht also der Grundsatz der Glaubensgerechtigkeit in Übereinstimmung mit dem in der Tora manifestierten Willen Gottes.

Schlüsseltext dieser schriftgebundenen Beweisführung in Röm 4 ist Gen 15,6 – «Abraham glaubte Gott, und es wurde ihm als Gerechtigkeit angerechnet (ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραὰμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην)» –, eine Stelle, die Paulus in Röm 4,3 programmatisch einführt und auf die er im weiteren Verlauf von Röm 4 wiederholt Bezug nimmt (V. 9.23.24). *Der erste Gedankengang (Röm 4,1–8)* ist also durch die Auslegung der zentralen Schriftstelle Gen 15,6 bestimmt, wobei Paulus «Werke bzw. Werke tun [NZB: eine Leistung erbringen] (ἔργα / ἐργάζεσθαι)» und «Glaube bzw. glauben (πίστις / πιστεύειν)» gegenüberstellt. Dabei wird die Gerechtigkeit aus Glauben des Näheren als Handeln Gottes am Menschen bezeichnet, das nicht auf einer bestimmten Leistung oder einem bestimmten Wert vonseiten des Menschen basiert, sondern in gänzlich asymmetrischer Weise dem Menschen als «inkongruente Gabe» (χάρις)²⁰ zugesprochen wird. Dieses gänzlich freie, nicht-reaktive Handeln Gottes wird in Röm 4,5 auf höchst paradoxe, ja provokative Weise als ein Handeln desjenigen Gottes verstanden, «der den Gottlosen rechtfertigt». Schliesslich wird dieses Rechtfertigungshandeln Gottes mithilfe einer weiteren Schriftstelle als Sündenvergebung interpretiert (Ps 31,1–2 LXX).

Der zweite Gedankengang (Röm 4,9–12) bearbeitet ein Problem, das Paulus wahrscheinlich seit der Auseinandersetzung mit den galatischen Gegnern beschäftigt, die wahrscheinlich «Abraham als Zeugen der Beschneidung und des

18 νόμον οὖν καταργοῦμεν διὰ τῆς πίστεως; μὴ γένοιτο· ἀλλὰ νόμον ἰσχύνομεν (Übers. Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*).

19 In Röm 3,31c ist νόμος vermutlich im Sinne einer literarischen Grösse (Pentateuch), und nicht im Sinne der zu erfüllenden Rechtsforderung der Sinai-Tora (so noch Röm 3,28: χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου), zu verstehen, siehe Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 273–74.

20 So John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2015), 485: «incongruous gift [...] We encounter again the Pauline presumption that to talk of God in relation to gift is to speak of divine action wholly at odds with worth». Ähnlich Flebbe, *Solus Deus*, 262: «Gottes Wirklichkeit ist bestimmt durch ein Heilshandeln, das anknüpfungslos allein seine Aktivität ist und dementsprechend keine menschliche Unterscheidung, auch nicht die von Juden und Heiden, kennt».

Gesetzesgehorsams ins Feld geführt hatten».²¹ Hat nicht Abraham die Beschneidung als Zeichen des Bundes zwischen Gott und seinem Volk erhalten (Gen 17,10–14)? Ist die Gerechtigkeit Gottes nicht an die Teilhabe am erwählten Volk gebunden? Paulus kann sich darauf abstützen, dass Gen 15 chronologisch Gen 17 vorausgeht, dass also Abraham die Glaubensgerechtigkeit erlangte, bevor er sich beschneiden liess.²² Zudem versteht Paulus die Beschneidung als Zeichen (σημείον) und Siegel (σφραγίς) «der Gerechtigkeit, die aus Glauben kommt, im Zustand der Unbeschnittenheit» (τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ).²³ Deutlich ist dabei, dass Paulus hier die Beschneidung einer neuen Interpretation unterwirft: «Wie ein Siegel die Urkunde nicht ersetzt, sondern sie nur bestätigt und deren Echtheit vergewissert, so bestätigt auch die Beschneidung nur, was Abraham schon als Unbeschnittener empfangen hat (Gen 15,6), und macht ihn lediglich der aus Glauben empfangenen Gerechtigkeit gewiss».²⁴ Demnach wird Abraham zum «Vater» aller Glaubenden, der beschnittenen (Juden) wie der unbeschnittenen (Heiden). Entscheidend ist nun nicht mehr die genealogisch (bzw. ethnisch) vermittelte Kontinuität der Nachkommenschaft

21 Michael Theobald, *Der Römerbrief*, EdF 294 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), 222. Zur Pluralität der Abrahamsvorstellungen im Frühjudentum wie auch in den frühchristlichen Schriften siehe (in chronologischer Abfolge) Matthias Konradt, «Die aus Glauben, diese sind Kinder Abrahams' (Gal 3,7). Erwägungen zum galatischen Konflikt im Lichte frühjüdischer Abrahamstraditionen», in *Kontexte der Schrift. Bd. 1: Text, Ethik, Judentum und Christentum, Gesellschaft*, FS Ekkehard W. Stegemann, ed. Gabriella Gelardini (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2005), 25–48; Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6*, WUNT 2/224 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), *passim*; Beate Ego, «Abraham im Judentum», in *Abraham in Judentum, Christentum und Islam*, eds. Christfried Böttrich, Beate Ego und Friedmann Eißler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 11–61; Matthias Köckert, *Abraham: Ahnvater – Vorbild – Kultstifter*, Biblische Gestalten 31 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), insb. 290–403 (zu den frühjüdischen und frühchristlichen Rezeptionen).

22 Cf. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ass. Roy D. Kotansky, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 318: «In a skillful paraphrase of Gen 17, Paul makes the case that circumcision was not only performed long after Abraham's reckoning as righteous, but also that it was merely a 'seal' of the righteous status that he had already received»; cf. auch 306.

23 Die Lesart des Paulus ist hier selektiv und interessegeleitet: Wie Michael Wolter richtig bemerkt hat, interpretiert Paulus die Beschneidung nicht mehr in einem *prospektiven* Sinn (vgl. Gen 17,11), sondern bindet die Beschneidung *retrospektiv* an die Grundaussage von Gen 15,6 zurück: «Paulus lenkt [...] den Blick von Gen 17,11 wieder zu Gen 15,6 zurück und stellt die Beschneidung Abrahams in das Licht von dessen Rechtfertigung. Die Beschneidung empfängt ihre Bedeutung damit allein von Abrahams Rechtfertigung her» (Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 290). Dabei fällt bei Paulus die symbolische Bedeutung der Beschneidung als *Bundeszeichen* für die Nachkommenschaft völlig weg (vgl. Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 289).

24 Köckert, *Abraham*, 359–60.

Abrahams – «der Beschneidung [kommt] kein eigenständiger theologischer Stellenwert» mehr zu²⁵ –, sondern die metaphorisch verstandene Kontinuität im Glaubensvollzug. Allerdings will Paulus nicht bestreiten, dass Abraham der «leibliche Stammvater» (προπάτωρ κατὰ σάρκα) des jüdischen Volkes bleibt (cf. Röm 4,1).

Der dritte Gedankengang (Röm 4,13–17a) führt die Überlegung des Paulus zu Abraham als Vater von Juden und Heiden weiter, indem er zwei neue Begriffe in Röm 4 einführt, «Gesetz» (νόμος) und «Verheissung» (ἐπαγγελία). Nebst der Beschneidung ist das Gesetz der zweite, umfassende Identitätsmarker, mithilfe dessen sich Israel seiner eigenen Identität versichert und sich zugleich von den Völkern unterscheidet. Der Ausdruck «Gesetz» scheint hier nun wieder im Sinne der Rechtsforderung der Sinai-Tora verstanden zu sein, dem im gehorsamen Handeln entsprochen werden muss. Dass ein solches Handeln zur Teilnahme an der «Verheissung» führt, bestreitet Paulus hier energisch, denn das würde seinen bisherigen Ausführungen direkt zuwiderlaufen. Nur die «Gerechtigkeit aus Glauben» ermöglicht Teilnahme an der von Gott ausgesprochenen Verheissung, also nur «gemäss (göttlicher) Gnade» (κατὰ χάριν, V. 16). Damit haben Heiden genauso am Verheissungswort Gottes teil wie die Juden. Dieser «inklusive[n] Universalität», die «Heiden und Juden beide als gleichberechtigt zusammenschliesst»²⁶ entspricht die universale und «a-territoriale» Neuinterpretation («Erbe der Welt», V. 13) der traditionellen Landverheissung, die seinerzeit an Israel erging.²⁷

Der vierte Gedankengang (Röm 4,17b–25) schliesslich *erläutert*, worin der zu Beginn von Röm 4 programmatisch zitierte Gottesglaube Abrahams konkret besteht («Abraham glaubte Gott...»). Paulus gibt zunächst an, auf welchen Gott sich dieser Glaube bezieht: auf denjenigen, der jederzeit schlechthin schöpferisch tätig ist («des Gottes, der die Toten lebendig macht und was nicht ist, ins Dasein ruft, θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιοῦντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα», V. 17). Anschliessend bestimmt Paulus den Glauben Abrahams existentiell als kontrafaktische Gewissheit («wider alle Hoffnung auf Hoffnung hin»), die gegenüber aller empirischen Evidenz und menschlichen Aussichtslosigkeit auf das Verheissungswort Gottes vertraut. Allerdings wird auch hier der konstitutive Zu-

25 Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 293. Allerdings gilt auch: «Paulus vertritt hier (gegenüber Gal 5,2) eine integrative Position, die mit den Empfängern des Briefes zusammenhängt. Seine Argumentation in Röm 4 hält die christliche Gemeinde für unbeschnittene 'Heiden' wie für beschnittene Juden offen: Nicht die Beschneidung überhaupt, nur eine Beschneidung ohne Glauben wird ausgeschlossen» (Köckert, *Abraham*, 360).

26 Flebbe, *Solus Deus*, 229.

27 Vgl. Gen 12,7; 13,15.17; 15,7–8.18; 17,8.

sammenhang von Glaube und Gnade (vgl. V. 16) nicht aufgegeben: Es ist *Gott*, der «dem Glauben die δύναμις [verleiht], der Anfechtung des Todes standzuhalten».²⁸ Abraham ist also auch hier gewiss Paradigma des Glaubens, aber auch hier nicht ethisches Modell (anders z. B. Jak 2,21–23). Zum dritten (V. 23–25) schlägt Paulus abschliessend die Brücke zur gegenwärtigen Generation aller Glaubenden («wir»), Judenchristen wie nichtjüdische Christen. Eine dritte Gottesprädikation rundet die Überlegungen des Völkerapostels ab: der Gott, von dem Röm 4 handelt, ist derjenige, «der Jesus, unseren Herrn, von den Toten auferweckt hat (τὸν ἐγείραντα Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν ἐκ νεκρῶν)» (V. 24b). Damit wird klar, dass der Glaube Abrahams und der Glaube der Christen sich nicht nur strukturell, sondern auch inhaltlich entsprechen: Es handelt sich jeweils um denjenigen Gott, der «schon immer und niemals anders gerechtfertigt hat und rechtfertigen wird als aufgrund des Glaubens».²⁹

Kommen wir zurück zu Barth. Ich beginne mit der Frage, wie Barth sich die *Figur Abrahams als geschichtliche Grösse* vorstellt.

Barth bezieht sich auf Abraham natürlich vor allem in seiner Auslegung von Röm 4 – ich werde mich im Folgenden darauf beschränken –, erwähnt ihn aber auch später einige Male, wobei er nicht nur Abraham als Paradigma des Glaubens (z. B. 410; 564; usw.), sondern auch als Paradigma der Heiden, d. h. als Unbeschnittener, betont; so z. B. 519, oder ausführlicher zu Röm 9,30: «Wie könnte sie [i. e. die Kirche] ganz und gar bestreiten, dass er der Gott der Juden *und* der Heiden ist (3,30)? Wird nicht Israels eigener Stammvater Abraham als der *Unbeschnittene* selig gepriesen? (4,9) Anerkennt es das aber, rechnet es auch nur mit der Möglichkeit, dass *salus* auch extra ecclesiam sein, dass Esau auch Jakob der Erwählte sein könnte, wo bleibt dann das Rückgrat, die Zuversicht der Kirche zu ihrer eigenen Sendung? [...] Was wird aus Israels Jagen nach der Gerechtigkeit, aus seinem Eifer um Gott, wenn es sich eingestehen muss, dass gerade die 'Anderen', die nicht Mitjagenden und Miteifernden schon am Ziele sind?» (495).

Die Frage ist komplexer, als es den Anschein macht, denn Barth verknüpft die Frage mit allgemeineren geschichtstheoretischen Überlegungen – dies ist vor allem in der Zweitausgabe von 1922 der Fall –, die zunächst durch ein längeres Zitat aus Nietzsches Abhandlung *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*³⁰ eingeführt und dann im Rahmen seiner Deutung von Röm 4,23–25 – wiederum im Rückgriff auf Nietzsches Historismuskritik – weiter entfaltet wer-

²⁸ Theobald, *Römerbrief*, 204, der darauf verweist, dass in Röm 4,20 («[...] er wurde stark im Glauben [ἐνεδυναμώθη τῇ πίστει]») die passivische Formulierung des Verbs ἐνεδυναμοῦσθαι «klarstellt, dass hier Gott logisches Subjekt ist».

²⁹ Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 315.

³⁰ Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 192.

den.³¹ Der «Beduinenhäuptling Abraham»³² ist, als historische Figur, für Barth ohne jedes Interesse: «der *historische* Abraham [geht] uns wirklich nichts [an]». ³³ Abraham ist nach Barth nur interessant, indem er auf etwas verweist, das der historischen Nachfrage letztlich entzogen bleibt, weil es um die Stellung des Menschen vor Gott (*coram Deo*) geht. So gesehen ist, überspitzt formuliert, nur der «unhistorische» Abraham von Interesse.³⁴ Barth bringt hier die Metapher des Oberlichts ins Spiel: «Abraham abgesehen vom Oberlicht des Unhistorischen geht uns nichts an, er sagt uns nichts, und wir hören ihn nicht».³⁵ Das Unhistorische ist das «Unanschauliche, Unbegreifliche, das aller Geschichte Ende und Anfang ist. Die Genesishistorie öffnet ihren Mund und *sagt das Unhistorische, dass dem Abraham sein Glaube als Gerechtigkeit angerechnet wurde*. Sofern sein Fall auch unser Fall ist, können sich unsre Ohren öffnen und dieses Unhistorische hören».³⁶ Also nur

in diesem Oberlicht gesehen redet die Geschichte als überlegene Meisterin mit dem Leben ('*historia vitae magistra*').³⁷ Um dieses Oberlichts willen, *nur* um seinetwillen, lauschen wir der Stimme der Geschichte [...]. Mythisch oder auch mystisch nennt die Ängstlichkeit des linearen Denkens dieses Oberlicht der Geschichte [...], wir aber möchten gerade auf der kritischen 'Linie, die das Übersehbare, Helle von dem Unaufhellbaren und Dunklen scheidet' (Nietzsche),³⁸ die ungeschichtliche, d. h. aber *ur-geschichtliche* Bedingtheit aller Geschichte, das Licht des *Logos* aller Geschichte und alles Lebens erkennen.³⁹

31 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 199 – 203.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 202.

33 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 203.

34 Vgl. gegen den Schluss der Auslegung von Röm 4: «Wir stehen mit dem Abraham der Genesis, der noch viel 'unhistorischer' ist, als die Analytiker sich träumen lassen, vor der Unmöglichkeit der Erkenntnis, vor der Unmöglichkeit der Auferstehung, vor der Unmöglichkeit der in Gott begründeten und von Gott zu erwartenden Einheit von Diesseits und Jenseits» (Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 202 – 203). Barth bezieht sich hier polemisch auf diejenigen, die «eine bloß analytische Historie» treiben (202).

35 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 200.

36 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 199 – 200, kursiv von mir.

37 Barth zitiert hier aus dem Römerbriefkommentar von Calvin, der zu Röm 4,23 festhält: «Locus quo admonemur de capiendi exemplorum fructu in Scripturis. Historiam esse vitae magistram, vere dixerunt Ethnici» («Die Stelle ermahnt uns, sich die Früchte der Beispiele in den Schriften anzueignen. Die Geschichte, so haben die Heiden richtig gesagt, ist Lehrmeisterin des Lebens»), cf. *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos, Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (*Calvini opera*), vol. 49 (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1892), 86; dt. Übers. nach *Calvin-Studienausgabe, Band 5.1: Der Brief an die Römer. Ein Kommentar* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 255.

38 Siehe Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, Zweites Stück: *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, 209 – 285, hier 214: «Die Heiterkeit, das gute Gewissen, die

Oder noch einmal anders formuliert: Abraham – unabhängig von der Frage seiner Historizität oder Nicht-Historizität – ist nur als «klassische Gestalt der *Wahrheitsgeschichte*»⁴⁰ von Interesse. Abgesehen von dieser Dimension der Wahrheit ist Historie nicht Geschichte, sondern bloss «kritische Materialsammlung», bloss «photographiertes und analysiertes Chaos».⁴¹ In der ersten Auflage von 1919 formulierte Barth noch wesentlich anders, klarer vielleicht, aber mit derselben polemischen Stossrichtung:

In der Wirklichkeit des Gottesreiches stand auch Abraham. Was ginge er uns sonst an? Was ginge uns sonst die Vergangenheit überhaupt an? [...] Das Verschiedene der Individuen, Zeiten, Verhältnisse und Gestaltungen sei, was es ist: die Oberfläche des Daseins. Solange es nur als Verschiedenes erkannt ist, ist es doch nur der offenbare Unsinn des Daseins. Denn das Nebeneinander, das zentrifugale Wimmeln und Geschleudertwerden der Erscheinungen ist Unsinn, nicht Sinn. [...] Was soll uns die Abrahamsgeschichte? Wozu blicken wir aus dem Leben der Gegenwart zurück in die ferne Vergangenheit? Jedenfalls nicht aus dem halb demütigen, halb hochmütigen 'Interesse' an entlegenen Heroen und Kirchenvätern. Das Menschliche an sich ist nicht wichtig, die ungeleitete Beschäftigung damit eitle Zeit- und Kraftverschwendung. Beim blossen 'Interesse' für das einmal Gewesene wird die Geschichte zu einem wirren Chaos sinnloser Beziehungen und Begebenheiten, die Historie trotz aller Kunst der Verknüpfung zu einer triumphierenden Entfaltung und Beschreibung dieses Chaos, bei dem das, was *wirklich* war, sicher verborgen bleibt.⁴²

Was aber genau gibt nach Barth die Abrahamfigur zu verstehen, damit es sich lohnt, in dieses «Selbstgespräch»⁴³ der Gleichzeitigkeit von Vergangenheit und Gegenwart überhaupt einzutreten? Barth antwortet darauf wie folgt, und zwar im Anschluss an Röm 4,2 («Wenn Abraham auf Grund seiner Werke gerecht erklärt wurde, dann gereicht ihm doch das zum Ruhm! *Ja*, aber nicht vor Gott!»⁴⁴):

das uns an diesem Menschen das Unanschauliche anschaulich wird, das uns das, was dieser Mensch *ist*, erinnert an das, was er *nicht* ist, dass hinter und über seinem Verhalten ein

frohe Tat, das Vertrauen auf das Kommende – alles das hängt, bei dem einzelnen wie bei dem Volke, davon ab, dass es eine Linie gibt, die das Übersehbare, Helle von dem Unaufhellbaren und Dunkeln scheidet», zit. nach der Ausgabe von Karl Schlechta, Bd. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, ⁹1982).

39 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 192.

40 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 171, kursiv von mir.

41 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 200.

42 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 142–43.

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 199.

44 Übers. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 163; «*Ja*» ist nicht im Fettdruck gesetzt, also erläuternde Ergänzung von Barth.

Geheimnis steht, das durch sein Verhalten ebensowohl verhüllt wie illustriert wird, das also jedenfalls nicht mit seinem Verhalten identisch ist.⁴⁵

Das Anschauliche, Offenkundige am Menschen, dessen, wonach er nach den Massstäben der Welt gemessen und als wertvoll befunden wird, sind seine «Werke» (ἔργα, Röm 4,2), «d. h. die in seinen Worten und Handlungen sich auswirkende Haltung, Richtung und Gesinnung».⁴⁶ Interessant ist hier, dass Barth diese «Gerechtigkeit aus Werken» nicht sofort und prinzipiell kritisiert, sondern zunächst einmal als «Erinnerung» bzw. als Hinweis auf ein Anderes begreift:

[...] sichtbare *Erinnerung* an unsichtbares, fremdartiges Geschehen ist der Eindruck, den wir von einem solchen Menschen empfangen: um so mehr, je stärker dieser Eindruck ist. Also: jenes offenkundig 'Gerechte' (Religiöse, Geniale, Bedeutende) in Abrahams und seinesgleichen Haltung, Richtung und Gesinnung mag ihm zum Ruhme gereichen [vgl. Röm 4,2: καύχημα], vor dem Forum der *Weltgeschichte* nämlich.⁴⁷

Damit steht der Mensch aber noch «*diesseits* der Todeslinie», auch wenn sein Sein «noch so stark von einem *Jenseits* Zeugnis gibt».⁴⁸ Was aber befindet sich jenseits dieser Linie, die den Tod vom Leben unterscheidet? Die Antwort von Barth ist lapidar: «*Jenseits* der Todeslinie ist Gott».⁴⁹ Wer ist dieser *Gott*, von dem hier die Rede ist? Und wer ist dieser *Mensch, der Gott glaubt*? Fangen wir mit letzterem an.

Es kann nicht überraschen, dass Barth das Schlüsselzitat von Gen 15,6 (Röm 4,3) – «*Abraham glaubte Gott, und das wurde ihm [von Gott] als Gerechtigkeit angerechnet*» – von der Grundspannung des Anschaulichen (bzw. des Offenkundigen) und des Unanschaulichen (bzw. des Geheimnisses) her analysiert und auf die Frage nach der menschlichen Identität hin zuspitzt. Zunächst *negativ* formuliert und von Röm 4,2 herkommend: «'Abraham glaubte Gott.' Also alles Eigene und darum Rühmensewerte an Abraham und seinesgleichen: sein heroisches Erleben und Handeln, seine bewusste oder unbewusste Persönlichkeit und

45 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 165.

46 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 164.

47 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 166. Siehe auch die von Barth da und dort vorgenommene erstaunlich positive Würdigung menschlicher «Leistung» im Anschluss an Röm 4,5: «Es gibt also eine andere Art, Menschen zu würdigen. Sie wird z. B. in der Genesis geübt und bei Dostojewski. Sie begnügt sich nicht damit, Ehre zu geben, dem Ehre gebührt [...]. Sie kann sich [...] nicht ohne wehmütigen Humor freuen an aller echt menschlichen Größe, an aller Gläubigkeit, an allem Heroismus, an aller seelischen Schönheit und geschichtlichen Bedeutung eines Menschen, aber nicht danach beurteilt sie ihn letztlich, sondern nach seinem Glauben» (170).

48 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 167.

49 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 167.

Frömmigkeit kommen als seine Gerechtigkeit vor Gott nicht in Betracht». ⁵⁰ *Positiv* formuliert ist Glaube «die Einsicht Abrahams, dass Gottes Wort wirkende Kraft hat (4,21) [...], dass Gott das Nicht-Seiende anspricht als Seiendes (4,17) [...], dass Gott die Ehre (die Doxa) gebührt (4,20)». ⁵¹ Deshalb kann Barth den Glauben als das schlechthin «Unmögliche, das Wunder, das Paradox» bezeichnen. ⁵² Im Glauben versteht sich also Abraham als jemanden, dessen Sein nicht in sich selbst, sondern in einem Anderen begründet ist. Deshalb kann Barth den Sachverhalt zugespitzt wie folgt formulieren:

Er ist aber, was er ist, als Glaubender, in der Kraft dessen, war *er nicht ist*. Denn in dem, was *er ist* (der religiös Erleuchtete, der geistig-sittliche Heros usw.), drängt zur Erscheinung sein Glaube, d. h. aber das, was *er nicht ist* (das Wunder, die neue Welt, Gott) Nimm die Todeslinie weg von Abrahams Glauben (die Aufhebung des Menschen durch seine Begründung in Gott), so nimmst du seinem Glauben den Inhalt, so sinkt er als menschliche Tat zurück in die Subjektivität, Relativität und Zweideutigkeit aller menschlichen Taten. Ist die Lebendigkeit Abrahams nicht in seinem Sterben begründet, so ist Abraham nicht Abraham. ⁵³

Die folgende Stelle zeigt noch genauer, wie Barth diese kritische Unterscheidung zwischen Glaube und Glaube versteht:

Sofern sein Glaube menschliche Haltung, Gesinnung und Richtung ist, ist er so wenig Gottesgerechtigkeit wie alles Menschliche. Sofern er Hohlraum, Begrenzung ist, die das Wunder, das Unmögliche, das Paradox umschließt, ist er, um dieses unanschaulichen Inhalts willen, von Gott aus qualifiziert als Gottesgerechtigkeit. ⁵⁴

Gerade die räumliche Metapher des *Hohlraumes* verwendet Barth sehr oft. ⁵⁵ Sie scheint ihm ein zutreffendes Bild zu sein, um die in Röm 4 vorgenommene phä-

⁵⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 167.

⁵¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 168.

⁵² Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 168.

⁵³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 168.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 169.

⁵⁵ Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 86; 93 («Hohlraum, Entbehren, Hoffen»); 124 («Hohlraum, *Beugung* vor dem, was wir *nie werden, nie haben, nie tun können*»); 153 («Hohlraum, Entbehren, Möglichkeit und Hinweis»); 158 («Entbehren, Ungenügen, Hohlraum und Sehnsucht»); 169 («Hohlraum, Begrenzung»); 170 («Hohlraum, Sehnsucht, Entbehren und Hoffnung eines Unanschaulichen»); 278 (zu Röm 6,8: «Glaube ist gerade in der vollen Paradoxie seines Begriffs als menschlicher Hohlraum, nein göttlicher Inhalt, als menschliches Verstummen, Nicht-Wissen und Warten, nein als göttliche Rede, Weisheit und Tat [...] die Umkehr, in der die Gleichgewichtslage, in der sich Ja und Nein, Gnade und Sünde, Gutes und Böses im Menschen befinden, gestört und aufgehoben wird»); 330 («nur Vakuum, nur Hohlraum, nur Offenheit»); 522 («Gehorsam heißt: es entsteht an diesem, dem bekannten Menschen jene Einbruchstelle, jener Hohlraum, wo der *neue*

nomenologische Beschreibung des Glaubens gegenüber dem Missverständnis abzusichern, wonach Glaube so etwas wie eine menschliche Leistung, ein Haben und Besitzen sei. Glaube ist ein *Wandern*, ein *Nicht-Besitzen*, ein *Sterben*, wie Barth prägnant zu Röm 4,12 – Abraham als Vater auch derer, die «wandern auf den Pfaden des Glaubens ohne Beschneidung»⁵⁶ – dann ausführt:

Ein fortgesetztes sich selbst Aufheben und Aufgeben, ein unermüdliches, unbestechliches Abnehmen-, Verzichten-, Heruntersteigen- und Sterben-wollen ist dieses Wandern, ein fortwährend erneutes Ausgehen von der nackten neutralen Menschlichkeit in ihrer völligen Armut und Fragwürdigkeit [...]. Echte religiöse Höhe negiert sich selbst, ist restlose Solidarität mit der Tiefe (3,22–23).⁵⁷

Dieser Ansatz erlaubt es Barth im Weiteren (vor allem in der Auslegung von Röm 4,9–12,⁵⁸ also bei der Thematik der Beschneidung als jüdisches Identitätsmerkmal), seine differenzierte *Religionskritik* zu thematisieren,⁵⁹ die seine Auslegung des Römerbriefs insgesamt bestimmt.

Zum zweiten: *Wer ist der Gott*, von dem hier die Rede ist? Nach meinem raschen Überblick über die Barthsche Interpretation des paulinischen Glaubensbegriff kann die Antwort nicht mehr schwerfallen. Ich muss mich hier kurz fassen. Für ein *negatives* Gottesverständnis bietet sich Röm 4,4 an,⁶⁰ ein «allgemeine[r] Grundsatz aus dem Alltagsleben, um deutlich zu machen, wie es bei Gott *nicht* zugeht».⁶¹ Würde das Verhältnis von Gott und Mensch analog zu einem

Mensch atmen und sich bewegen kann»); usw. Semantische Äquivalente: «offener Raum, Hinweis, Anlass und Gelegenheit» (77); u. a.

56 Übers. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 178.

57 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 182.

58 Überschriften mit: «Glaube ist Anfang», Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 175–82.

59 Vgl. nur die folgende aufschlussreiche Passage: «Und so ist auch Abrahams Glaube *noch nicht* Beschneidung, *noch nicht* Religion, *noch nicht* das seelisch-geschichtliche Phänomen der Gläubigkeit. Der Glaube ist die Voraussetzung jener Gegensätze, ihr ursprünglich Gemeinsames: er ist weder religiös noch unreligiös, weder heilig noch profan, und er ist immer auch beides [...]. Welt ist Welt, und in der Welt ist auch Abraham [...]. Kommt aber für den Genesistext als Gerechtigkeit nur dieses Unanschauliche Abrahams, sein Glaube in Betracht, dann versteht er offenbar ‘Gerechtigkeit’ als ein Sein, Haben und Tun Gottes gegenüber dem in sich geschlossenen Kreis der Welt, innerhalb dessen auch die religiöse Welt liegt. Dann ist es offenbar im Sinn der Religion selbst, wenn wir sagen, dass die Religion in ihrer geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit *nicht* Voraussetzung und Bedingung des positiven Verhältnisses Gottes zum Menschen ist» (Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 177–178).

60 «Wer eine Leistung erbringt, dem wird der Lohn nicht aus Gnade ausbezahlt, sondern weil er ihm zusteht (litt: aus Schuldigkeit), τῷ δὲ ἐργαζομένῳ ὁ μισθὸς οὐ λογίζεται κατὰ χάριν ἀλλὰ κατὰ ὀφείλημα», Übers. NZB.

61 Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 283; kursiv von mir.

menschlichen Arbeitsverhältnis verstanden, dann würde das Handeln Gottes von einer bestimmten menschlichen Leistung abhängig gemacht werden. Michael Wolter formuliert wie folgt: «Würde Gott aufgrund von Werken rechtfertigen [...], würde er wie ein Mensch handeln»; aber nur «ein Handeln, das aus Gottes freier Initiative hervorgeht und auf seinem eigenen Entschluss basiert, entspricht seinem Gott-Sein». ⁶² Barth sieht dies ebenso, formuliert aber ungleich schärfer und ironischer, wenn er von Gott

als den an das Wirken des bedeutenden Menschen als Kontrahent und Schuldner von Rechts wegen gebundenen obersten Kampfrichter und Preisverteiler [spricht], wobei es auf der Hand liegt, dass dieser 'nach Schuldigkeit' Lohn auszahlende 'Gott' *nicht* Gott ist, sondern der Herren eigener Geist. ⁶³

Wie würde dann ein *positives* Gottesverständnis zu formulieren sein, das Herantasten an einen Gott, der eben nicht nach Schuldigkeit handelt, sondern κατὰ χάριν, aus freier Gnade? Barth greift auch hier auf komprimierte, dialektisch zu nennende Aussagen zurück, um denjenigen Gott zu beschreiben, der «jenseits der Todeslinie» ist:

begründend als der Unbegründete, wesentlich, weil ohne alles Wesen, bekannt als der Unbekannte, redend in seinem Schweigen, barmherzig in seiner unnahbaren Heiligkeit [...], gnädig in seinem Gericht, *nicht* der Mensch und eben darum der reine Ursprung [...]. Immer ist Gott dem Menschen jenseitig, neu, fern, überlegen, nie in seinem Bereich, nie in seinem Besitz, immer sagt *Wunder*, wer Gott sagt. ⁶⁴

3 Zum Schluss – hat uns Barth als Exeget noch etwas zu sagen?

Was folgt aus meinem knappen Durchgang durch den Text von Barth, vor allem durch seine Auslegung von Röm 4? Lernen wir beim Studium der Barthschen Interpretation vor allem etwas über den *Systematiker und engagierten Zeitgenossen Barth* oder auch etwas über den Brief des Paulus an die Gemeinde von Rom? Hat uns nicht nur der Systematiker, sondern auch der *Exeget* Barth noch etwas zu

⁶² Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 284.

⁶³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 169–70. Zur Unterscheidung von Gott und Nicht-Gott, siehe auch die Ausführungen von Declan Kelly, «Existence between God and the No-God», in diesem Band.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 167. Zur Interpretation dieser Stelle siehe auch den Beitrag von Hans-Christoph Askani, «Das Wunder des Glaubens. Zu Röm 3,21–4,8», in diesem Band.

sagen oder sollen wir seinen Römerbriefkommentar als ein theologiegeschichtlich gewiss bedeutendes, aber exegetisch doch definitiv überholtes Werk beurteilen? Damit das Gespräch zwischen Barth und uns heutigen Exegetinnen und Exegeten sich so fruchtbar wie möglich gestaltet, wäre es wichtig, wenn wir uns entschlossen auf die *theologische Sachproblematik des Römerbriefs* einliessen. Wenn uns dies gelingt, wird auch die Stimme des jungen Barth wieder Gehör finden und zu einer faszinierenden Herausforderung für uns werden.⁶⁵ Neuere Auslegungen zu Röm 4 – ich denke vor allem an diejenigen von Jochen Flebbe von 2008 und Michael Wolter von 2014 – konvergieren in überraschender Weise mit dem theozentrischen Ansatz von Barth in der Betonung, wonach Röm 4 nicht sosehr ein Diskurs über Abraham an sich, oder über seine heilsgeschichtliche Funktion oder über die im Rahmen des damaligen paulinischen Missionsprojekts wichtige Frage nach der Teilhabe der ‘Heiden’ an die an den jüdischen Stammvater Abraham ergangene Heilsverheissung darstellt, sondern zuallererst als eine intensive Meditation über den Gott zu verstehen ist, der «schon immer und niemals anders gerechtfertigt hat und rechtfertigen wird als aufgrund des Glaubens».⁶⁶ Oder um nochmals Wolter das Wort zu geben: «Sein eigentliches Thema ist Gott selbst».⁶⁷ Dabei dürfte selbstverständlich sein, dass es sich hier nicht um ein abstraktes Nachdenken über ‘Gott an sich’ geht, wie Jochen Flebbe betont hat: «Es handelt sich [bei der Rede von Gott in Röm 4] keinesfalls um eine abstrakte Darstellung Gottes, die somit ohne Konsequenzen für die menschliche Wirklichkeit bleibt».⁶⁸ Umgekehrt gilt, dass «die Person Abraham mit den mit ihr verbundenen Erzählungen nicht auf die Definition des Menschen zielt, sondern dass

65 Siehe auch das Plädoyer von John Barclay, «‘For I am Not Ashamed of the Gospel’: Commentary as Interpretation in the *Römerbrief*», in diesem Band.

66 Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 315. Sehr ähnlich Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Römer*, RNT (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1985), 105: «Insofern Abraham als Demonstrationsfigur dient, ist er als Anfänger der Volksgeschichte Israels bedeutsam (vgl. V. 1). Aber das Kontinuum zwischen Damals und Heute verläuft gerade nicht über die Geschichte, sondern ist darin begründet, daß Gott jetzt wie damals gleich handelt, indem er den Gottlosen auf Glauben hin rechtfertigt».

67 Wolter, *Römer. Teilband 1*, 315. Selbstverständlich müsste die vor allem von Flebbe und Wolter akzentuierte Interpretationslinie von Röm 4 mit weiteren zeitgenössischen Auslegungen in Beziehung gesetzt werden, die die missionstheologische und sozialgeschichtliche Dimension der paulinischen Ausführungen stärker gewichten. Genannt sei hier nur Michael Cranford, «Abraham in Romans 4: The Father of All Who Believe», *NTS* 41/1 (1995): 71–88 («The interpretation of Romans 4 offered here is one in which Abraham is not viewed as an example of Christian faith, but is instead used by Paul to show why Gentiles share in the covenant because they, too, are children of Abraham», 73). Dies kann aber im Rahmen dieses Aufsatzes nicht geschehen.

68 Flebbe, *Solus Deus*, 265.

sich [...] zuallererst und primär an Abraham zeigt, mit welchem Gott Israel und die Menschheit [...] es zu tun haben, wer und wie Gott ist».⁶⁹

Und noch eine letzte Bemerkung, die zeigen soll, wie wertvoll das Gespräch mit Barth auch in Zukunft sein könnte. Es fällt auf, wie stark der Basler Systematiker vor allem in der zweiten Auflage den gesamten Römerbrief unter einer *kreuzestheologischen Perspektive* gelesen hat.

Nur ganz wenige Bemerkungen hierzu. Dass der Gott Jesu von Nazareth nur in der paradoxalen Indirektheit und Unanschaulichkeit des Kreuzes wahrgenommen werden kann, ist ein Gedanke, der sich konsequent durch die ganze Auslegung Barths in der Zweitfassung von 1922 hindurchzieht. Prägnant z.B. zu Röm 5,6: Der neue Mensch «lebt vom *Sterben des Christus*. Anschaulich wird das Leben des Christus, seine Auferstehung, in der der Glaube seine Quelle hat (5,10), in seiner oboedientia passiva, in seinem Tod am Kreuz; einzig und allein und ausschliesslich am Kreuz» (218); zu Röm 8,18–25: Das Kind Gottes «hört die Stimme der Wahrheit *im* Leiden, an der Wurzel aller menschlichen Fragen und Antworten. Es 'will in allen Dingen bis auf den hoffnungslosen Grund sehen' (Nietzsche),⁷⁰ weil *dort* die Hoffnung ist: Ave *crux* unica spes mea!» (418–419); zu Röm 8,24–25 («Eine Hoffnung aber, die man sieht, ist keine Hoffnung...»): «[...] wüssten wir *Jesus Christus* anders denn als Gekreuzigten [...], wäre das Inkognito gebrochen, in dem das Heil zu uns gekommen ist [...]. 'Sichtbare Hoffnung ist *nicht* Hoffnung.' Direkte Mitteilung von Gott ist keine Mitteilung von *Gott*. Christentum, das nicht ganz und gar und restlos Eschatologie ist, hat mit *Christus* ganz und gar und restlos nichts zu tun [...]. Erlösung ist das Unanschauliche, Unzugängliche, Unmögliche, das als *Hoffnung* uns begegnet» (430).

Auch wenn Barth «ein ausgesprochener Selbstdenker» war und es darum schwierig ist, «Einflüsse, Faktoren und Impulse in ihrer Wirkung auf Barth genau einzuschätzen»,⁷¹ kann man sich fragen, was Barth zu dieser originellen Lesart des Römerbriefs geführt hat: die seit Januar 1919 beginnende intensive Beschäftigung mit dem ersten Korintherbrief,⁷² oder vielleicht doch eher Martin Luther, den er ausgiebig zu Wort kommen lässt? Wie dem auch sei: Die Entscheidung

⁶⁹ Flebbe, *Solus Deus*, 170.

⁷⁰ Siehe Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, Drittes Stück: *Schopenhauer als Erzieher*, 287–365, hier 320: «Der heroische Mensch verachtet sein Wohl- oder Schlecht-Ergehen, seine Tugenden und Laster [...], er hofft von sich nichts mehr und will in allen Dingen bis auf diesen hoffnungslosen Grund sehen. Seine Kraft liegt in seinem Selbst-Vergessen», zit. nach der Ausgabe von Karl Schlechta, Bd. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982). Zur Nietzsche-Rezeption Barths, siehe Niklaus Peter, «Karl Barth als Leser und Interpret Nietzsches», *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte / Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 1/2 (1993): 251–64.

⁷¹ Cornelis van der Kooi, «Zweiter Römerbrief», in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 195–200, hier 195.

⁷² Cf. van der Kooi, «Zweiter Römerbrief», 195.

Barths, den Römerbrief im Licht der Kreuzestheologie der korinthischen Korrespondenz – und mindestens ebenso im Licht der *theologia crucis* Luther's – zu lesen, führt zu einem Verständnis der Offenbarung Gottes, das sowohl theologisch wie anthropologisch ausserordentlich ertragreich ist.⁷³ Sie kommt aber für die heutige exegetische Zunft eher überraschend, die nur noch selten das ganze *corpus paulinum* – oder zumindest die sogenannten echten Paulusbriefe (Röm, 1–2 Kor, Gal, Phil, 1 Thess und Phm) – als organische Einheit in den Blick nimmt und auf dieser Basis nach «der» Theologie des Paulus fragt. Wie gehen wir mit der von Barth energisch vorgetragenen *kreuzestheologischen* Interpretation des Römerbriefs um und wo könnte ihr kritischer Impuls für die heutige wissenschaftliche Paulusexegese sein? Ob Karl Barths Theologie «ihre beste Zeit noch vor sich hat», wie Ralf Frisch reichlich kühn in seiner anregenden Einführung in das Denken Barths formuliert hat,⁷⁴ vermag ich nicht zu beantworten. Es wäre aber ausserordentlich schade, wenn die von Barth vorgeschlagene theologisch verdichtete Interpretation des Römerbriefes nicht mehr aufgenommen und kritisch diskutiert, sondern auf dem Altar der gegenwärtigen Hyperspezialisierung der neutestamentlichen Exegese geopfert würde.

73 Ralf Frisch, *Alles gut: Warum Karl Barths Theologie ihre beste Zeit noch vor sich hat* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2018), hat dies folgendermassen zusammengefasst: «Dass vor allem in der zweiten [...] Auflage von Barths Römerbriefkommentar ununterbrochen irdische, menschliche, gesellschaftliche, politische, ethische und theologische Gewissheiten so in Schutt und Asche gelegt werden [...] wird von Barth auch als Konsequenz einer kreuzestheologischen Zuspitzung der Offenbarung Gottes zur Sprache gebracht. Denn Barth zufolge ist es Christus – insbesondere der tote Christus am Kreuz –, der die Krise alles Menschlichen verursacht und offenbart. Und dieser gekreuzigte, nicht mehr schöne Gott ist dann auch das Ende der schönen, kulturell und religiös siegesgewissen theologischen Erzählung. Die ungebrochene, moralisch optimierende Gottesrede [...] wurde von Karl Barth expressionistisch zertrümmert. Sein zweiter Römerbriefkommentar ist Zeugnis einer Menschheits- und einer Götterdämmerung» (32–33).

74 So der Untertitel des Essays von Frisch, *Alles gut*.



II Hermeneutics and Metaphysics

Jean-Luc Marion

Barth sur l'être du monde devant Dieu. Ce que le *Römerbrief* permet de préciser dans la *Dogmatik*

Abstract: A close reading of Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* (1st edition) may help us identify the real breakthrough of the theologian – a breakthrough whose implications for philosophy have yet to be noted. The breakthrough has less to do with the rejection of *analogia entis* in the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (this critique is not as precise and pertinent as often imagined) than in the way of replacing the question of being, and the claims that this is the first question, by a new starting point in the event of God's revelation in Christ. The revelatory event must ground all thinking, including on being. The present contribution seeks to show how Barth effects this reversal.

1 La percée

Barth accomplit un tel *Durchbruch* (pour reprendre une expression familière au *Römerbrief*, mais aussi par laquelle Heidegger saluait la sixième des *Logische Untersuchungen* de Husserl), qu'à la fois nous en sommes tous les héritiers et nous ne pouvons plus nous comprendre sans lui, mais aussi que nous n'identifions pas facilement vers où et vers quoi cette percée nous conduit : comme si elle avait ouvert trop de possibilités et permis trop d'héritages contradictoires, suivant trop d'évolutions internes.

Bien entendu, on doit se souvenir qu'en 1919, la première édition du *Römerbrief* (tout comme la seconde édition, parue à Zurich en 1922), s'inscrivait dans un jaillissement d'ouvrages décisifs souvent rédigés durant la Première Guerre elle-même et publiés juste après : Wittgenstein et le *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1921), les premiers cours de Heidegger à Freiburg (1919), Rosenzweig et le *Stern der Erlösung* (1921), Étienne Gilson avec *Le Thomisme : introduction à la philosophie de saint Thomas d'Aquin* (première version en 1919), voire les écrits de guerre de Teilhard de Chardin et Lubac, etc. Sans aucun doute, les deux éditions du *Römerbrief* doivent s'appréhender dans ce moment de prise de conscience d'une crise de la rationalité européenne (sanctionnée définitivement par Valéry, entre autres, et surtout par Husserl), qui affecta toutes les formes culturelles de l'époque (des sciences fondamentales à la peinture, la musique et la littérature). Plus précisément, ces années marquèrent le com-

mencement de la « fin de la métaphysique » ; ou plutôt l'officialisation publique de cet événement, dont le déclenchement remonte au moins à Nietzsche. C'est donc dans ce contexte que devint possible, voire inévitable, la double et parallèle mise en question de la théologie chrétienne ; chez les catholiques, celle du néo-thomisme, apparemment encore triomphant, mais déjà subverti par le « Ressourcement », les études patristiques et bientôt la fondation des « Sources chrétiennes » ; chez les protestants, celle de l'assimilation libérale de la Révélation biblique à l'éthique kantienne, précisément subvertie par Barth.

Reste à déterminer la cible exacte de la « percée » réalisée par Barth avec le *Römerbrief*. Ce qui ne va pas de soi, comme le prouve d'abord l'étonnement sincère du pasteur de Safenwil devant le bruit de la cloche qu'il fit sonner sans l'avoir prévu, ensuite l'obligation où il se sentit d'en écrire aussitôt une seconde version sans laisser subsister « pierre sur pierre » à la première, avant d'opérer un nouveau commencement avec l'étude sur saint Anselme (*Fides quærens intellectum. Anselms Beweis der Existenz Gottes*, 1931), en vue de la *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, commencée en 1932, mais évolutive à l'extrême jusqu'à la fin. On pourrait aller jusqu'à suggérer que Barth a tenté – autant, voire plus que nous, ses lecteurs – durant toute son œuvre de comprendre ce qu'il avait lui-même visé et ce qu'il avait lui-même trouvé.

2 La possibilité d'une autre question

Dans ce contexte, il est tentant de considérer les deux éditions du *Römerbrief* comme un commencement génial, un « livre sensationnel »,¹ mais finalement sans suite, voire manqué. Comme la *Geburt der Tragödie* masque sans doute la véritable portée de Nietzsche, comme le *Tractatus* n'anticipe qu'*a contrario* la véritable recherche de Wittgenstein, voire comme *Sein und Zeit* a pu paraître une « Sackgasse » au dernier Heidegger, on peut considérer les écrits de 1919 et 1922 comme un faux départ, qui brouille la véritable percée, celle accomplie par l'immense cathédrale de la *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. Peut-être est-ce même, au fond, ce que suggère l'ouvrage par ailleurs remarquable et indispensable de Hans Urs von Balthasar, lorsqu'il ne leur consacre qu'un rapide chapitre IX, les qualifiant de « livre étrange »,² de théologie « expressionniste »,³ plus origéniste et hégé-

1 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: Jakob Hegner Verlag, 1951; Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976), tr. fr. par Eric Iborra et Jean-Pierre Fels, *Karl Barth. Présentation et interprétation de sa théologie* (Paris : Cerf, 2008), 103.

2 Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, 105.

3 Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, 103 et 133.

lienne, voire mythique, que vraiment biblique et chrétienne. Et en conséquence, les choses vraiment sérieuses ne commenceraient qu'en 1932 avec la *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, autrement dit avec le débat sur l'*analogia entis* (ch. X et XI, puis toute la dernière partie, ch. XVII-XX). Cette lecture a évidemment une grande force et de bons arguments pour s'imposer, d'autant qu'elle fait d'un débat classique entre catholiques et protestants (la nature et la grâce) aussi le centre de gravité de toute l'œuvre de Barth.

Ainsi, dans cette interprétation, tout dépendrait en fin de compte de la célèbre déclaration : «Ich halte die *analogia entis* für die Erfindung des Antichrist und denke, daß man *ihretwegen nicht* katholisch werden kann».⁴ C'est pourtant justement cette interprétation que nous voudrions discuter et nuancer ici. D'abord en contestant la justesse de l'accusation portée par Barth sur et avec l'*analogia entis* dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (III). Ensuite en retrouvant, dans le *Römerbrief* (et surtout le premier), la réponse de Barth à une autre question, plus fondamentale que celle de l'*analogia entis* : la question de l'être du monde (IV). Autrement demandé : ce que veut dénoncer Barth en contestant l'*analogia entis* ne masque-t-il pas, sous les aspects d'une polémique d'autant plus virulente qu'elle reste peut-être très convenue, trop classique même, un autre débat plus essentiel et plus radical, un débat où les catholiques et les protestants pourraient se retrouver côte-à-côte sans difficulté, parce qu'il porte sur une question commune : que vaut, que devient, que signifie l'être du monde devant la Révélation de la parole de Dieu? Ou encore : que reste-t-il de la *Seinsfrage* quand on tente de l'entendre (contre Heidegger évidemment !) à partir de quelque chose comme la Révélation de la parole de Dieu ?

3 L'imprécision de l'*analogia entis* dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik*

D'emblée, l'*analogia entis* se trouve impérieusement convoquée pour définir une «doctrine catholique» (supposée univoque et intemporelle), qui se définirait par sa «foi» en «das Stattfinden einer Gottähnlichkeit des Geschöpfs auch in der gefallenen Welt und damit die Möglichkeit, das profane "es gibt" auch auf Gott

⁴ Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1932), viii. «C'est pourquoi je tiens l'*analogia entis* pour l'invention par excellence de l'Antichrist, et j'estime que c'est à cause de cela qu'on ne peut pas devenir catholique». Tr. fr. par Fernand Ryser, *Dogmatique. La doctrine de la Parole de Dieu* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1953), xii (rév.). Voir Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, 248.

und göttliche Dinge anzuwenden».⁵ Elle permet ainsi d'aboutir à une connaissance neutre et compréhensive, sans obscurité et sans douleur («ohne Hülle, ohne Welthaftigkeit oder doch nur in jener harmlosen, *analogia entis* zur durchschauenden Welthaftigkeit»⁶) de Dieu dans les mêmes (ou quasiment) termes que les étants créés ; ou encore, elle permettrait d'atteindre une connaissance indirecte qui pourrait, sans douleur, finir par devenir directe, au contraire de la véritable connaissance de la foi chrétienne, toujours indirecte («[...] wirkliche Indirektheit [...] [und] nicht bloß die harmlose, kraft der *analogia entis* in Direktheit umzuwandelnde Indirektheit»⁷). En d'autres termes, les droits de la transcendance divine seraient niés ou du moins compromis par toute tentative d'une quelconque *analogia entis*.

Pourtant cette claire et brutale opposition, Barth doit, et cela très vite, la tempérer. Et pour un motif impératif : cette dénonciation de la similitude (*Ähnlichkeit*) entre Dieu et l'homme, entre le Créateur et le créé, aussi radicale soit-elle, doit composer avec une autre *similitudo* absolument essentielle de l'homme avec Dieu, celle de l'*imago et similitudo Dei*, la *Gottförmigkeit* de Gn 1,26 ; ainsi, avant même que l'*analogia entis* ne se trouve reprise, au fil des ans et des discussions (en particulier avec Hans Urs von Balthasar à la suite de l'*Analogia entis* que Erich Przywara publia lui aussi en 1932), à l'intérieur déjà de l'*analogia fidei*, Barth admit donc que, d'une certaine manière, il devait «frôler d'un cheveu» la doctrine catholique :

„Gottförmigkeit“ nannten wir die Möglichkeit des Vernehmens des Wortes Gottes. Das sagt ja auch der Begriff der *imago Dei*. Wir müssen uns klar sein darüber, daß wir uns damit in haarscharfer Nähe der katholischen Lehre von der *analogia entis* befinden. Aber auch und gerade in dieser Nähe wird unsere Lehre eine ganz andere sein müssen als jene. Wir verstehen die hier in der Tat zu behauptende Analogie, Ähnlichkeit oder Gleichförmigkeit zwischen Gott und Mensch gerade nicht als *analogia entis*, d. h. nicht als eine überschaubare und durchschaubare, vom Standpunkt eines Schauenden aus in einer Synthese als Analogie zu *verstehende* Analogie. Nicht ein *Sein*, das das Geschöpf mit dem Schöpfer bei aller Unähnlichkeit gemeinsam haben soll, sondern das keiner bloßen Theorie zugängliche *Tun*, die menschliche Entscheidung ist im Glauben in aller Unähnlichkeit ähnlich der Entscheidung der Gnade Gottes. Von *mehr* als einer Analogie oder Ähnlichkeit darf nicht die Rede sein. Und es muß betont sein, wie es übrigens auch die katholische Lehre von der *analogia entis* tut, daß es sich um eine Ähnlichkeit bei größerer Unähnlichkeit handelt.⁸

5 Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1, 40.

6 Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1, 175.

7 Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1, 180.

8 Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1, 252.

L'allusion à la formule du concile de Latran IV (1215) est évidente ici: «[...] quia inter Creatorem et creaturam non potest tanta similitudo notari, quin inter eos major sit dissimilitudo notanda».⁹ Mais, ne peut-on se retenir de demander, *qui* a jamais, parmi les vrais théologiens *même catholiques*, revendiqué une telle «verstehende Analogie»? Examiner ce point décide de tout, ou du moins vérifier si la critique de l'*analogia entis* porte sur un danger réel, ou s'il s'agit d'une *shadow boxing history of dogmatics*.

Or on doit constater, sans exagération polémique, que la conception et l'emploi par Barth du syntagme d'*analogia entis* reste historiquement fort imprécis, et donc aussi conceptuellement impraticable. Relevons quelques points à l'évidence discutables dans la thèse barthienne.¹⁰

D'abord Thomas d'Aquin lui-même ne parle que d'*analogia nominum* (par exemple en *Summa Theologiæ* Ia, q. 13), mais ne recourt jamais, quand il traite de l'*analogia*, à la formule d'*analogia entis*; Cajetan qui a, lui, pourtant largement contribué à imposer l'*analogia entis*, intitule encore son traité *De nominum analogia* (1498). Ce qui veut dire qu'en bonne doctrine thomasienne, l'analogie ne porte précisément pas sur l'*ens*, pour cette raison fondamentale qu'ici Dieu, au titre de son *actus essendi*, ne relève justement *pas* de l'*ens commune*. Thomas d'Aquin ne soumet en aucun cas Dieu à un «conceptus entis» quelconque, donc ne dérive vers aucune univocité. C'est le méconnaître gravement que de lui attribuer le jugement de Suárez, selon lequel seulement «[...] objectum adæquatum hujus scientiæ [sc. la métaphysique] debere comprehendere Deum».¹¹ Thomas d'Aquin échappe donc à l'éventuel reproche barthien d'*analogia entis* pour la même raison qu'il échappe au possible diagnostic heideggerien d'une constitution onto-théo-logique.¹² À quoi s'ajoute le fait que Thomas d'Aquin

9 Canon *De Trinitate*, c. 2, Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, n. 432, cité par Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik* I/1, 40.

10 Outre Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, ch. XVII-XVIII, au plus proche des travaux de Henri de Lubac, voir Jean Greisch, «*Analogia entis* et *analogia fidei* : une controverse théologique et ses enjeux philosophiques (K. Barth et E. Przywara)», *Les Études philosophiques*, no. 3/4 (juillet-décembre 1989): 475–96 et *The Analogy of Being. Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, éd. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

11 Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicæ*, I, s.1, n.26, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Charles Berton (Paris : Vivès, 1856), t. 25, 11. Sur ces points d'histoire, voir notre étude *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes. Analogie, création des vérités éternelles et fondement* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1981; 2009), § 5–7 et Jean-François Courtine, *Suárez et le système de la métaphysique* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

12 Voir notre démonstration sur ce point dans *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1982 ; 1991), ch. VIII.

privilégie, sous le titre d'*analogia*, finalement l'*analogia attributionis* (*pros hen*),¹³ qui se caractérise justement en ceci qu'elle renforce l'écart entre Dieu et la créature, au contraire de l'analogie de proportionnalité.

D'où suit la seconde correction : ce n'est pas l'*analogia* comme telle qui menace la transcendance divine, mais son interprétation univociste. Or celle-ci ne commence que quand apparaît un *conceptus entis* (au moins à partir de Duns Scot), puis un *conceptus univocus entis* (au moins à partir de Suárez) ; à cette condition seulement l'*analogia entis* a effectivement joué le rôle d'une neutralisation de la distance de Dieu à l'homme par la maîtrise supposée de l'univocité de l'étant. «Nunc solum assero omnia quæ diximus de unitate conceptus entis longe clariora et certiora videri, quam quod ens sit analogum ; et ideo non recte propter defendendam analogiam negari videtur unitatem conceptus, sed si alterum negandum esset, potius analogia, quæ incerta est, quam unitas conceptus, quæ certis rationibus videtur demonstrata, esset neganda. Re tamen vera, neutram negari necesse est»¹⁴ – C'est en ce sens que le concept univoque d'*ens* peut bel et bien *comprehendere Deum*.¹⁵ Il s'ensuit une dernière rectification : ce virage, indiscutablement discutabile, ne s'est pas produit avant la Réforme (qui se serait ainsi opposée à la dérive préalable de l'*analogia entis*), mais pour l'essentiel en même temps qu'elle, voire après elle (qu'on songe que Suárez publie ses *Disputationes* en 1597). Ainsi, l'*analogia entis* ne peut constituer un motif originaire de la rupture, mais, au mieux, un des indices de ses conséquences, à supposer, ce qu'on pourrait contester, que la scolastique calviniste ne se soit pas elle-même, très vite et totalement ralliée aux positions métaphysiques de Suárez. Et réciproquement, l'*analogia entis*, qui n'apparaît pas dans les textes du magistère romain (pas même dans ceux de Vatican I), ne constitue pas un élément intrinsèque de «la doctrine catholique» (si le singulier a un sens ici), qui reste toujours soumise au principe de la «major dissimilitudo» (Latran IV), principe lui-même qui n'est ni «catholique», ni réformé, mais simplement chrétien.

Il faut sans doute conclure de ces corrections que le concept d'*analogia entis* forgé dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* manque de précision historique et donc de pertinence théologique. Mais cela ne signifie pas pour autant que la polémique de Barth soit sans objet. Cela signifie seulement qu'elle vise, sous le nom in-

¹³ Contrairement à Aristote, qui ne parle d'*analogia* que pour la relation de deux relations (mathématiques). Voir Bernard Montagnes, *La Doctrine de l'analogie de l'être selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris : Vrin, 1963 ; 2008).

¹⁴ Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicæ*, II, s. 2, n. 36.

¹⁵ Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicæ*, I, par exemple (outre n. 26, 11 déjà citée), s. 1, n. 13, 6 ; n. 19, 9 ; n. 38, 48.

adéquat d'*analogia entis*, une dérive théologique qui, elle, a bel et bien eu lieu : il s'agit de l'inclusion du Dieu de la Révélation, celle de Celui qui se révèle, qui se révèle lui-même et qui se révèle en tant que tel, dans le système de la *metaphysica* et sa compréhension par le *conceptus univocus entis* que mit en œuvre, depuis Goclenius (1608), Lohrardus (1613) et Clauberg (1664), la science qu'on a alors tardivement nommée *ontologia*. Et cette *ontologia*, par oxymore, n'a que le *cogitabile* pour objet. En ce sens, et en ce sens seulement, la polémique de Barth trouve, en parallèle d'ailleurs aux études de Henri de Lubac sur le surnaturel, sa profonde légitimité : elle ne s'adresse pas au fantôme imprécisé d'une prétendue *analogia entis*, mais à l'idolâtrie consistant à inclure Dieu dans les conditions *humaines* de l'expérience finie de l'être, à titre d'*ens supremum*, ou de quelque autre titre ontico-ontologique dont on voudra l'affubler. Cette idolâtrie-ci, celle qu'exerce de fait la *metaphysica*, mais que répète et prolonge encore la *Seinsfrage*, mérite parfaitement qu'on la combatte comme une invention de l'Anti-christ.

4 La Révélation comme événement selon le *Römerbrief* de 1919

Une si radicale dénonciation du primat de la *Seinsfrage* et de la *metaphysica*, au-delà et sous les apparences d'une polémique trop convenue contre l'*analogia entis*, suppose une avancée et un élan eux-mêmes radicaux – ce que nous nommons, pour commencer, le *Durchbruch*, la percée initiale de Barth. Or cette percée fut bel et bien initiale, puisqu'elle eut lieu dès le premier *Römerbrief*. Non seulement la violence même du premier essai ne doit pas étonner, mais elle s'avère inévitable, puisqu'il s'agissait de prendre un élan suffisant pour renverser et transpercer un obstacle aussi solide et résistant que l'idolâtrie métaphysique de Dieu (particulièrement sous les figures jumelles de l'*ens supremum* néo-scolastique et du protestantisme libéral). Le point d'impact, qui procure seul un nouveau point de départ, se situe dans la Révélation elle-même, désormais entendue (et reçue) comme le véritable *Durchbruch*, la véritable percée. Car pour transpercer l'idolâtrie métaphysique de Dieu, il ne faut rien de moins, en fait de percée, que celle non pas d'une nouvelle théologie, mais de Dieu se révélant lui-même à partir de lui-même. Autrement dit, la Révélation ne s'accomplit pas par rapport à d'autres conditions qu'elle-même et qu'elle seule ; elle ne présuppose aucune corrélation avec quelque réalité qui la précèderait ; elle intervient en parfaite et absolue dé-corrélation avec ce que pourtant elle interpelle d'autant plus fortement. Car si Dieu se révèle lui-même, par lui-même et comme tel, il ne

peut par définition pas *répondre* à des questions posées sans lui par les hommes, parce qu'il ne peut pas *correspondre* aux conditions *a priori* que fixe la connaissance humaine. Ainsi s'esquisse un concept strictement *théologique* de Révélation, par opposition aux concepts *épistémologiques* (propositionnels) qu'a privilégiés, positivement ou négativement, la majorité des théologiens sous l'influence des philosophes de l'*Aufklärung*.

Il s'agit donc de penser la Révélation comme un événement. Et c'est pourquoi la loi ne suffit pas à accomplir une révélation, car il ne s'agit que d'une

[...] Weissagung göttlicher Taten, aber nicht ihr Ereignis. Ja, Gottes Gerechtigkeit kündigt sich an im Gesetz – aber sie müßte Glauben finden, um zur Offenbarung des Heils zu werden. Es enthält die Botschaft, daß Gott *allein* es tut, und daß *er* gesucht werden muß – aber die Botschaft müßte gehört werden.¹⁶

Tant que la foi ne reçoit pas ce qui se révèle, il ne saurait encore proprement s'agir de Révélation. Avec la Révélation, il n'y va pas seulement «[...] um eine weitere Anbietung der Wahrheit [...], sondern um das Ereignis, in dem die Wahrheit sich frei macht aus ihrer Gefangenschaft».¹⁷ *A fortiori*, quand l'auto-révélation du Christ aboutit à sa résurrection, faut-il la recevoir non pas comme un «[...] *problematisches*, sondern nur ein *sich ereignendes Gutes*».¹⁸ Ce qui se révèle ne consiste pas d'abord dans une vision ou dans une écoute, mais dans l'intervention de l'événement de Dieu dans l'histoire, «[...] das Eintreten dieser Kraft Gottes im Christus also ein *geschichtliches Ereignis*».¹⁹ Barth anticipe donc sur tous les essais de théologie de l'histoire qui seront censés le dépasser (Moltmann, Jünger, etc.), en historisant (si l'on peut dire) la Parole dite, jusque dans une Révélation effective :

Es muß sich zeigen, daß die Offenbarungs-Möglichkeit, auf die sich die Gerechtigkeit der Menschen stützt, durch die Gerechtigkeit Gottes im Christus und im Glauben zur Offenbarungs-Wirklichkeit geworden ist.²⁰

16 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, éd. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 52. Sur l'écart entre la Loi et la Révélation, lire aussi : «Das Göttliche *wächst organisch*, so braucht es kein *mechanisches Aufbauen* mehr. Insofern eben steht die Offenbarung Gottes, die nun eingetreten ist, "außerhalb des Gesetzes", ist sie gegenüber den Kundgebungen, deren Träger die Idealisten sind, eine prinzipiell andere, neue Tat Gottes» (90). Et : «Gotteswunder sind keine mechanischen Eingriffe fremder Gewalten, sondern Offenbarungen der eigentlichen, tieferen Natur der Dinge und der Menschen» (238).

17 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 85.

18 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 264.

19 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 301.

20 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 67.

Mais comme la Parole révèle en passant de la possibilité à l'effectivité, cette événementialisation (encore une fois, si l'on peut dire) anticipe aussi sur la doctrine bultmanienne de la Parole se révélant par l'*Anrede* et l'*Anstoß*,²¹ mais sans céder aux excès de la dé-mythologisation, qui abstrait la Révélation de notre monde. La Parole en tant qu'événement nous arrache au monde de la mort, mais nous maintient dans la «nature» de ce monde, parce que la volonté de Dieu régit encore et toujours l'unique monde : «Ist der Wille Gottes euch im Christus Naturgesetz geworden, dann ist's eben damit Ereignis geworden, daß ihr "herausgerissen" seid aus "diesem Leibe des Todes" [Rm 7,24–25a]». ²² Il faut y insister : la Parole se produit en provoquant un *Ereignis*. Mais cet événement ne se borne pas (comme chez Fichte, voire Kierkegaard) à imposer à la conscience subjective l'injonction de la moralité, de la foi (Bultmann encore), voire l'appel de l'être (Heidegger). Comme *Ereignis*, la Parole intervient dans l'effectivité, dans l'histoire, dans la nature – au point que grâce à elle la volonté de Dieu apparaît comme «la loi de la nature [*Naturgesetz*]». On pourrait même dire que la volonté de Dieu se révèle comme la véritable et unique *loi naturelle*. C'est sans doute ici l'une des plus nettes ruptures de Barth avec la théologie protestante libérale : la révélation se joue bien dans la Parole, mais la Parole accomplit et s'accomplit comme un *Ereignis*, selon une événementialité effective, qui ne se limite pas à la subjectivité même croyante ou morale, mais qui en revanche intervient dans l'effectivité, celle de l'histoire certes, mais dans celle même de la nature. Bref, la Parole révèle Dieu à la face du monde, à l'encontre du monde, mais précisément au sein de l'effectivité du monde. Et c'est pourquoi la Parole, en tant qu'événement, atteint le monde dans son mode d'être, interfère donc avec ce que le monde dit de son être, bref, rencontre la *Seinsfrage*.

5 La signification de Romains 4,17 selon le *Römerbrief*

Nous faisons l'hypothèse que le fond du *Römerbrief* réside dans l'affrontement entre l'événement de la Parole (comme acte de Révélation) et la *Seinsfrage*. Autrement dit, il s'agit d'une question qui demande : «Qu'en est-il de l'être dans le cas de la Révélation de la Parole de Dieu en Jésus-Christ?», où Barth entend

²¹ «Wirkliche, ernsthafte Frage lebt von der Antwort». Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Erster Band. Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik*, 1927, éd. Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe II.14 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), 104.

²² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 309.

donc décider de la *Seinsfrage* à partir de la Révélation, et non pas, comme toute la théologie moderne (de Suárez à Tillich ou Rahner), comme toute la philosophie moderne (de Leibniz à Heidegger) décider de la Révélation à partir de la *Seinsfrage* et des conditions *a priori* de son *ontologia* ou de sa *Fundamental-ontologie*. Nous suggérons aussi que ce renversement s'opère à l'occasion du commentaire de Rm 4,17, texte étrange et impressionnant si on le prend littéralement au sérieux : «[Abraham] a cru en Dieu qui fait vivre les morts et appelle les non-étants à titre d'étants [θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα]». En effet, le Nouveau Testament n'évoque pas souvent (c'est le moins que l'on puisse dire) les ὄντα/ μὴ ὄντα, et ne se préoccupe que rarement de la transition des uns aux autres. Mais ce texte fait exception, Barth le voit parfaitement bien et le commente avec précision : «Wer aber ist dieser Gott ? Noch einmal sei's gesagt gegenüber allen Befürchtungen, die sich an diese absolute Unnahbarkeit Gottes und an das absolute Wunder des Glaubens knüpfen möchten : *nicht* der Gott, der uns ferne ist, sondern der Gott, in dem wir leben, weben und *sind* [Ac 17,28]». ²³ On remarque qu'il s'agit ici d'un Dieu non-lointain, et même si proche de l'homme en tant que l'homme *est*, que Barth semble déjà suggérer que la *Seinsfrage* pourrait devenir le mode et le lieu de cette proximité ; au point d'évoquer positivement le texte attribué à Paul sur l'Aréopage (en Actes 17), que pourtant l'exégèse courante disqualifie le plus souvent comme trop «grec» pour être honnête. La suite du commentaire confirme cette orientation :

Nicht der Gott, der vor den Menschen, wie er ist, eine ungeheure, abenteuerliche Forderung hinstellt, sondern der Gott, der eine neue, die ursprüngliche Menschheit schafft. *Der* Gott, "der die Toten lebendig macht und das Nicht-Seiende ins Sein ruft" [Rm 4,17]. Nicht um eine Entwicklung handelt es sich, sondern um eine Verwandlung, nicht um einen Emporstieg innerhalb des alten Äon, sondern um den Anbruch eines neuen. Das Bisherige liegt dahinten als Tohuwabohu [Gn 1,2], dem von Gott die fernere Existenzberechtigung abgesprochen ist. Die Menschen innerhalb dieser alten, diesseitigen Welt sind für Gott Tote. Das Wesen aller Dinge in dieser Welt ist, von Gott aus betrachtet, das "Meon [μὴ ὄν]", das Nicht-Seiende, das Nichts [cf. 1 Co 7,31]. In diese Welt tritt Gott aufs neue herein, nicht mit einer Moral [...], nicht nur als der "Geist" [...], sondern als der Schöpfer [...], der den Toten ruft, und sie werden lebendig, dem Nichts, und es wird zum Etwas.²⁴

Dieu entre dans le monde comme créateur, donc en vertu d'abord de sa proximité (qui ne contredit pas sa transcendance, mais la fait éprouver), ensuite de son autorité sur l'être du créé. Ou plutôt sur l'être *comme créé* : car c'est en tant

²³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 137.

²⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 137.

que créateur que Dieu intervient dans le monde et convertit les non-étants en étants du même geste par lequel il a converti le *tohu wa bohu* en un *kosmos* ; le Christ agit en tant que Verbe créateur : « Ainsi, quiconque est dans le Christ [devient] une nouvelle création [ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις] » (2 Co 5,17). Dieu se fait proche du monde en le créant à nouveau dans le Christ. Cette souveraine liberté à l'encontre de la différence entre *étant* et *non-étant* caractérise évidemment Dieu seul (Schelling), mais peut, dans le Christ et par son imitation, devenir la manière *juste* pour chaque croyant d'*être* dans le monde, « usant du monde *comme* [ὡς] n'en n'usant pas [οἱ χρώμενοι τὸν κόσμον ὡς μὴ καταχρώμενοι] » (1 Co 7,31). Réciproquement, le monde peut se croire *étant*, alors que, du point de vue de Dieu qui considère son éloignement et son étrangeté envers la Parole, il *n'est plus un* étant : « Denn *die Welt und Menschheit, die jetzt ist, ist tatsächlich in das Chaos, in das Nichts zurückgekehrt* ». ²⁵ Et ce qui vaut d'abord du point de vue de Dieu, l'homme peut lui aussi l'éprouver en faisant l'expérience de « la stupidité » à laquelle le monde se trouve soumis, en situation de péché (« τῇ γὰρ ματαιότητι ἡ κτίσις ὑπετάγη », Rm 8,20), et qui dis-qualifie sa « nature » comme une « néantité » (*Nichtigkeit*). ²⁶ La différence ontique entre *étant* et *non-étant* ne se trouve pas abolie, mais surdéterminée par l'autorité créatrice de Dieu, qui peut toujours dis-qualifier un *étant* comme *non-étant* (du fait qu'il s'est fermé à la Parole) comme aussi re-qualifier un *non-étant* en *étant* (du fait de la première création, comme aussi de la nouvelle création). La différence ontique ne dépend pas de l'autorité ontologique de l'être même, mais de l'autorité créatrice de Dieu, qui manifeste alors une autorité ontologico-ontique sur le monde. Ce retournement – voir l'étant et le non-étant du point de vue de Dieu maître de l'être, et non plus du point de vue de l'être (créé), donc le voir d'ailleurs que depuis la *Seinsfrage* – ne peut se faire et aussi se faire connaître de nous, que dans le Christ, Dieu avec et chez nous :

Denn *im Christus* hat Gott selbst die Schranke, die ihn und sein Gesetz von der Welt trennte, nämlich das durch die Sünde bedingte kraftlose Sein aller Menschen und aller Dinge "im Fleische", durchbrochen und hat in göttlicher Freiheit, Kühnheit und Paradoxie "*seinen Sohn*" in der abgefallenen Menschheit, seine Kraft in unserer Unkraft, *das Sein im Nicht-Seienden* erscheinen lassen als das beherrschende Prinzip einer veränderten Natur

²⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 300. Ce que confirme la seconde édition du *Römerbrief* : « Pour la foi, la vie et l'être transcendants, c'est ce qui, du point de vue de la vie et l'être immanents, ne peut être appelé que mort et non-être, et, inversement, la vie et l'être immanents, c'est ce qui, du point de vue de la vie et de l'être transcendants, ne peut être appelé que mort et non-être ». *L'Épître aux Romains*, trad. Pierre Jundt (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1972 ; ²2016), 137.

²⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 327.

gesetzlichkeit, als Kristallisationskern einer neuen Welt, als Anfänger und Haupt eines Organismus von neuen Menschen und neuen Dingen.²⁷

Il y a une explication à ce renversement. Car si Dieu peut voir et faire voir le monde des (non-)étants autrement que la *Seinsfrage* ne les voit – c'est-à-dire décidés selon l'être, donc suivant qu'ils sont des essences, des οὐσία ou non –, il le doit à ce que son regard voit les choses selon leur véritable effectivité, qui se mesure *autrement que par l'être*, mais selon celui qui les aime et ce qu'elles aiment :

[...] die Erklärung, daß dieser Zusammenhang vor ihm [i. e. Gott] *nichts ist, ein Schein, ein Zwischenfall, eine Lüge*, der Schleier der Maja, daß sein eigener Zorn über diese Welt nur die *Negation ist seiner Liebe* [...], die Erklärung, daß eben nicht die Ungerechtigkeit, sondern seine ursprüngliche, wesentliche, eigentliche Gerechtigkeit *in Kraft* steht, daß *seine* Welt, die Welt, wie sie war im Anfang und sein wird am Ende, die wahre, die eigentliche Welt ist. Diese Erklärung ist die *Katastrophe der nicht-wirklichen Wirklichkeit* der sogenannten Geschichte und der *Durchbruch der wirklichen Wirklichkeit* seines kommenden Reiches.²⁸

L'effectivité des choses ne dépend pas de l'être, mais de l'amour ou de la négation d'amour entre elles et Dieu. Barth, malheureusement, ne trouve pas les mots exacts pour faire sentir parfaitement une telle re-qualification des non-étants en une effectivité supérieure (nous dirions presque une effectivité érotique). Du moins risque-t-il souvent le pléonasme de la «reale *Wirklichkeit*» ou de la «lebendige *Wirklichkeit*»,²⁹ pour expliquer que «[...] ihre [sc. Welt] "*Wirklichkeit*" *zum Schein* herabsinkt gegenüber der sich hier offenbarenden *wirklichen Wirklichkeit*».³⁰ Nous ne forçons pas le trait en interprétant ainsi l'*Ereignis* de la Parole de Dieu dans le *Römerbrief* comme un renversement phénoménologique. Il s'agit bien d'une révolution dans l'apparaître, puisque Barth n'hésite pas à parler d'une révolution : «Geist kann in der Gegenwart nichts Anderes sein als Revolution, auch die Revolution dessen, was sich in der Gegenwart Revolution nennt!»³¹ Révolution jusqu'à renverser toute révolution humaine en effet, puisqu'il s'agit de la «göttliche Weltrevolution», de la «[...] im Christus kommende Revolution [...]».³² À la même époque, Heidegger clamait vouloir «révolutionner l'Université». On peut préférer la révolution dans le Christ que pro-

27 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 296, nous soulignons.

28 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 87–88, nous soulignons.

29 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 303 puis 190.

30 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 161, nous soulignons.

31 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 316.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 507 puis 509.

clamait Barth, non seulement pour sa plus large et haute ambition, mais pour sa mise en pratique, qui fut, elle, effective.

6 La *Seinsfrage* du point de vue de la Révélation

Ainsi, pour autant que cette lecture se justifie dans les textes, on conclura que le *Römerbrief*, avec l'*Ereignis* de la Parole comme renversement de l'étant et du non-étant, anticipe sur le combat de la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* contre l'*analogia entis*, mais que, dans cette continuité (qu'il faut souligner, à l'exemple de Hans Urs von Balthasar), le premier enjeu touche beaucoup plus juste que la seconde polémique. L'*analogia entis* n'offre qu'un fantôme d'adversaire, imprécis et caricatural, tandis que la révolution de la différence ontique attaque et atteint, elle, le primat supposé de la *Seinsfrage* sur le monde et sur son Créateur. Sans doute on ne peut pas se risquer trop avant à attribuer un projet philosophique à Barth, ou plutôt à lui attribuer une claire vision des présuppositions et des conséquences philosophiques de sa « percée » théologique. La portée phénoménologique du *Römerbrief* reste très largement soit implicite, soit méconnue (et peut-être même méconnaissable). Pourtant, on peut oser tirer trois corollaires possibles de cette brève analyse.

Un premier paradoxe consiste dans l'admission, par Barth, d'une phénoménalité *naturelle* de Dieu à travers le monde ; Dieu se manifeste dans le monde, bien que ce soit à l'encontre de ce que le monde dit et croit manifester, à savoir lui-même et non pas Dieu. Cette manifestation naturelle de Dieu par le monde n'implique pourtant aucune « théologie naturelle », mais résulte de l'extension de la Révélation à la nature elle-même, conformément à Rm 1,17–21. Les textes ne manquent pas qui l'affirment. Remarquons-en un :

In Wahrheit stehen die Dinge so, daß wir *im Spiegel des Sichtbaren* das ganz Wirkliche, nämlich *das unsichtbare Wesen Gottes zu schauen* sehr wohl im Stande sind. Es gibt kein Draußen ohne Drinnen, *keine Erscheinung ohne Wesen*, keine "Werke" ohne "die ewige Kraft und Gottheit", aus der sie hervorgegangen.³³

On peut même entendre ici comme un écho du principe déjà phénoménologique, « soviel Schein, soviel [Hindeutung aufs] Sein », inauguré par Herbart et repris par Husserl puis Heidegger.³⁴ La révélation et la visibilité de Dieu dans ou à

³³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 28, nous soulignons.

³⁴ Références dans *Étant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 19.

partir du monde sensible ne supposent aucune *analogia entis*, ni ne réclament aucune « théologie naturelle », parce que le rapport entre le monde créé et Dieu créateur ne se conçoit plus selon la *Seinsfrage*, mais selon la grâce et l'amour de Dieu, qui incluent l'être, mais ne s'y résument pas.

D'où un autre résultat peu attendu : le monde que Dieu restitue en se révélant reste *le monde* : « [...] die Offenbarung der höhern, in Gottes Wesen begründeten Weltordnung ». ³⁵ Il n'intervient pas pour constituer un autre-monde, ni un arrière-monde (au sens de Nietzsche), car il s'agit en fait du seul monde, mais désormais (re-)devenu lui-même, tel qu'à l'origine il devait originellement être en vérité :

In der Gestalt und Ähnlichkeit des Daseins auf Grund der alten Weltordnung, erscheint ein Dasein, das gegenüber all dem scheinbar Gleichartigen, von dem es umgeben ist, mit un-zweideutiger Originalität [...] die ursprüngliche göttliche Weltordnung vertritt. ³⁶

La nouvelle vision du monde, qui rétablit à partir du regard de Dieu ce que l'ancienne avait obscurci à partir de la *Seinsfrage*, s'accomplit dans la lumière même que projette la Révélation, donc par le regard du Christ absolument neuf sur le même et unique monde :

Die im Christus geschehene Offenbarung ist ja eben nicht die Mitteilung einer intellektuellen Klarheit, einer Weltformel, deren Besitz die Möglichkeit einer Beruhigung böte, sondern Kraft Gottes, die uns in Bewegung setzt, Schöpfung eines neuen Kosmos, Durchbruch eines göttlichen Keims durch wiedergöttliche Schalen, anhebende Aufarbeitung der unerlösten Reste, Arbeit und Kampf an jedem Punkt und für jede Stunde. ³⁷

Certes, on pourrait soupçonner ici une restauration de l'apocatastase ; il semble plus honnête et correct d'y voir le dépassement vigoureux de l'accusation d'arrière-monde chrétien, au nom d'une vision claire de la nature en dernière instance *non-ontologique* des (non-)étants. Car le point de vue du Christ, la lumière de son regard non seulement peut nous advenir, mais elle nous adviendrait comme une propriété intellectuelle, régulière, *immédiate et normale* de notre condition restituée :

³⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 279, nous soulignons.

³⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 302, nous soulignons.

³⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 356. Lire aussi : « Das ist der Christus : die über die gesetzliche Mahnung und Drohung hinausgreifende geschichtliche Tat und Offenbarung Gottes zugunsten der Welt, die er nicht aufhört als *seine* Welt in Anspruch zu nehmen » (302–3).

Was ist uns Mose, was ist uns Plato, Kant und Fichte, wenn im Christus die *Unmittelbarkeit* aller Menschen zu Gott proklamiert wird, wenn es kein besonderes, persönlich abgegrenztes Gottesvolk, keine Aristokratie des Geistes mehr geben soll ?³⁸

Ou encore :

Weil *Gott* aus unsern Augen sieht und das Maß unsrer Maße ist und denkt in unsern Gedanken – *darum* erschauen wir im “Innern der Natur” zugleich uns selbst und in uns selbst sein unsichtbares Wesen, das Urbild aller Bilder, die Idee aller Ideen, die Kraft aller Kräfte, die Wahrheit aller Wahrheiten.³⁹

La Révélation de la parole de Dieu ferait donc connaître les secrets de la *nature* ? Certes, mais il n’y a là rien d’étonnant, même en stricte orthodoxie protestante – pourvu qu’on comprenne que le secret de la nature, c’est que son être ne lui vient ni d’elle-même, ni de la *Seinsfrage*, mais du don qui l’a créée et ne cesse de la donner à elle-même.

Enfin s’impose un dernier paradoxe. Dans le Christ, advient la paix («Frieden mit Gott [εἰρήνην ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν]», Rm 5,1) avec la transcendence de Dieu : «Es ist wieder die *unmittelbare, direkte Beziehung* zwischen den Gedanken Gottes und der Welt, wie sie geworden ist durch sein Wort».⁴⁰ Un tel «[...] *unmittelbare Erkenntnisverhältnis* zu Gott [...]»⁴¹ ne doit pas s’entendre (simple-ment ?) comme extrinsèque, parce qu’il repose sur la similitude, la ressemblance et l’unité *organique* du Créateur avec la créature : car «[...] die *verlorengegangene organische Einheit* von Gott, Welt und Mensch tritt *wieder* in Kraft».⁴² Ou : «Im Christus sein heißt die *neue oder vielmehr urälteste* Natur des Lebens, seine Natur in Gott, ungekünstelt und unverworren und unbedenklich *wieder* gelten und wirken lassen».⁴³ Il serait très superficiel de se demander si un certain panthéisme ou quelque nostalgie de l’*Hen panta* rôderait ici alentour ; car ce serait ignorer l’évidence qui les interdit à Barth. Toutes ces unités, immédiateté et réconciliation, ne contredisent pas la «percée» du Christ, mais en proviennent et résultent, parce que le Christ ne peut être jugé par personne, ni par rien. Il constitue en effet le nouvel et dernier *a priori*, et un *a priori* même ontique : «In

38 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 104.

39 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 29. De même Abraham «[...] braucht keine mystische Intuition, weil er bei Gott *ist* und von Gott aus *sieht*» (132). En effet : «Das Fleisch macht das Menschliche, das mit dem Göttlichen eins sein müßte, zum Nur-Menschlichen» (82).

40 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 148.

41 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 34, nous soulignons.

42 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 88, nous soulignons.

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 297, nous soulignons.

diesem im Christus eröffneten göttlichen Apriori der Natur und Geschichte liegt das klare und vollständige Wissen um die kommenden Dinge».⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 347.

Jean Grondin

Le manifeste herméneutique de Karl Barth

Abstract: In 1961, Gadamer said of the *Römerbrief* that it was “in spite of its aversion for methodological reflection a sort of hermeneutical manifesto” (GW 2, 391). To what extent is the *Römerbrief* a hermeneutical manifesto? This essay analyses the inherently hermeneutical character of the *Römerbrief*, i.e., the way in which it puts forward a hermeneutics that anticipates and inspired some of the later developments in this field. Barth’s hermeneutics remains focused on the truth of the *Römerbrief* and what it has to say to us today, discrediting any methodical or historical consideration of the text. He would thus have recognized himself in a title such as “Truth and Method”. By its very title, Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* identifies itself with the text it strives to bring to our understanding and has precious little to say about the Romans!

1 Un double anniversaire

Nous avons célébré en 2019 deux centenaires significatifs pour la philosophie et la théologie, surtout si on les entend avec une oreille herméneutique (ce que notre oreille est toujours) : c’est bien sûr l’année de la parution du *Römerbrief*, mais c’est aussi l’année de ce que l’on a appelé la « percée herméneutique » de Heidegger dans son cours de l’hiver 1919.¹ Cette percée herméneutique s’exprime dans une conception inouïe de l’herméneutique qui enracine celle-ci dans la question radicale qu’est pour elle-même l’existence humaine, dont Heidegger dit qu’elle est herméneutique parce qu’elle est « capable d’interprétation, qu’elle a

1 Voir Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1993), 49. Cette percée se serait manifestée pour la première fois dans le cours d’urgence (le *Kriegsnotsemester*) de 1919 sur « L’idée de la philosophie et le problème des visions du monde », in Martin Heidegger, Gesamtausgabe, Band 56/57, *Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie* (Frankfurt am Main : Klostermann, 1987) ; *Vers une définition de la philosophie*, trad. Sophie-Jan Arrien et Sylvain Camilleri (Paris : Seuil, 2017). En vérité, c’est dans ses cours de 1919 à 1923 que Heidegger développe son nouveau point de départ herméneutique dont on peut dire qu’il culminera dans le cours de l’été 1923 sur *L’Herméneutique de la facticité* (Gesamtausgabe 63). Si on peut le dire, c’est parce que Heidegger résumera lui-même, dans *Sein und Zeit* (cité suivant la pagination originelle), tous ses cours donnés depuis 1919 sous l’intitulé d’une « Herméneutique de la facticité » (*Sein und Zeit*, 72). À son sujet et sur le tournant qu’il signifie dans l’histoire de l’herméneutique, voir les explications de mon « Que sais-je? » sur *L’Herméneutique* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2006, ⁴2017), 29 – 32.

besoin d'interprétation et qu'elle vit depuis toujours au sein d'interprétations».² Cette dramatisation de l'herméneutique le conduit à penser la philosophie elle-même comme une «herméneutique de la facticité», qu'il faut entendre dans les deux sens du génitif : c'est de l'existence qu'il faut d'abord proposer une herméneutique (génitif objectif), parce que l'existence a tendance à s'obnubiler elle-même (ce serait donc une herméneutique qui rappellerait ou exhorterait l'existence à elle-même), mais cette herméneutique appartient aussi à l'existence elle-même (au sens du génitif subjectif), car c'est à elle qu'il revient d'accomplir cette élucidation fondamentale de son être si elle doit accéder, comme elle en a la vocation, à «un éveil radical», *eine wurzelhafte Wachheit*, à propos d'elle-même.³

Comme ce sera le cas chez Barth, cette herméneutique existentielle donne vigoureusement congé aux problématiques épistémologiques, méthodologiques et historiques traditionnelles de l'herméneutique, que Heidegger et Barth estiment «dérivées». Le défi fondamental de l'herméneutique n'est pas de savoir ce qui permet de valider une interprétation ou de tirer au clair les conditions transcendantales de la connaissance, mais de confronter l'existence à la *question* radicale qu'elle est pour elle-même et qui est en attente de décision. Cette radicalisation de l'herméneutique exercera un grand ascendant sur des auteurs comme Gadamer, Ricoeur et un certain Bultmann, pour ne nommer qu'eux.

Ce n'est sans doute pas un hasard si ce nouveau départ de l'herméneutique et de la philosophie se fait jour la même année où Barth a adressé son coup de semonce à la théologie avec son intense *Römerbrief*. On ne peut que s'émerveiller devant la précocité des deux génies : Karl Barth n'a que trente-trois ans lorsqu'il publie son *Römerbrief* (un manifeste de 500 pages avec à peu près aucune note de bas de page) et c'est aussi à l'âge christique de trente-trois ans que Heidegger donnera son cours d'herméneutique de la facticité en 1923 !

On peut voir dans les nouveaux départs de Barth et Heidegger des conséquences de la Première Guerre mondiale et du traumatisme qu'elle aura signifié pour les Européens, à plus forte raison pour les Allemands : un monde ancien venait de s'écrouler et on se savait en période de crise, de *krisis*, «entre les temps». Oswald Spengler avait lui-même donné le ton en publiant en 1918 le premier tome de son best-seller sur *Le déclin de l'Occident*. On ne pouvait plus continuer comme avant et on était à la recherche d'un nouveau départ, en philosophie comme en théologie, mais aussi au plan de l'histoire humaine.

² Heidegger, *L'Herméneutique de la facticité*, 15.

³ Heidegger, *L'Herméneutique de la facticité*, 16. Voir aussi : «In der Hermeneutik bildet sich für das Dasein eine Möglichkeit aus, für sich selbst verstehend zu werden und zu sein», 15.

Barth aura été imprégné de ce sentiment de crise. Il n'était pas allemand, mais on sent l'ombre de la Grande Guerre quand il parle gravement tout au long de son *Römerbrief*, et surtout dans ses premiers chapitres, de la «colère de Dieu» et du «jugement de Dieu» porté sur le genre humain comme tel, colère où la pensée dialectique de Barth veut reconnaître «la lumière de l'amour divin»⁴ : Dieu ne nous condamne que parce qu'il nous veut du bien. Barth pensait-il alors au *Dies irae* du *Requiem* de Mozart en évoquant ce jugement de Dieu qui s'était montré intraitable dans le cataclysme qui venait de s'abattre sur l'Europe ? Dans cette situation de crise, le salut ne peut résider selon Barth que «là où nous ne sommes plus soutenus que par Dieu, par Dieu lui-même et par Dieu seul» («dort, wo wir nur noch von Gott, von Gott selbst, von Gott allein gehalten sind»)⁵. Ce serait cela la vérité «intemporelle» du *Römerbrief* : l'homme ne peut espérer le salut que d'un *Halt* vertical, aussi invraisemblable qu'inconcevable, qui ne lui serait offert que dans «l'impossible possibilité» (*unmögliche Möglichkeit*) de la foi, que le *Römerbrief* interprète toujours, de manière géniale, comme une *Treue*, une fidélité de Dieu,⁶ à laquelle répondrait une *Gegentreue* de l'homme, une «fidélité en écho».⁷ Dans cette conception très décentrée de l'homme humilié, qui subvertit l'anthropocentrisme de la modernité et qui trouvera un écho en herméneutique (que Gadamer définira comme l'art de ne pas avoir raison), l'initiative revient toujours à Dieu. Seule cette foi, ou cette grâce, nous permettrait de «voir le sens dans le non-sens de l'histoire».⁸ En réponse au non-sens des entreprises humaines, qu'aurait dévoilé la Grande Guerre, Barth et l'herméneutique surinvestissent, de manière révélatrice, la notion de «sens» : l'homme est essentiellement une question, une énigme, pour lui-même, mais où trouver une réponse dans un monde de non-sens ? La promotion de la notion de sens présuppose son contraire, l'ubiquité du non-sens.

4 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, éd. Cornelis van der Kooij et Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015), 20; 122. Nous citerons également la traduction de Pierre Jundt: Karl Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1972), en en modifiant parfois le texte (ici 198).

5 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 75.

6 «Treue Gottes ist jenes göttliche Beharren, kraft welches es an vielen zerstreuten Punkten der Geschichte immer wieder Möglichkeiten, Gelegenheiten, Zeugnisse für die Erkenntnis seiner Gerechtigkeit gibt», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 77 ; «Glaube ist selbst Treue Gottes», 79.

7 «Darin besteht ja der Glaube, die der Treue Gottes begegnende Gegentreue des Menschen», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 8 ; «C'est en cela, à la vérité, que consiste la foi, qui est la fidélité réciproque de l'homme répondant à la fidélité de Dieu», *L'Épître aux Romains*, 39 (trad. modifiée). Le mode de cette «foi en écho» s'exprime avant tout par un acte de «pénitence [*Buße*]», *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 460.

8 «Wir sehen Sinn im Un-Sinn der Geschichte», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 76.

Démasquant, à l'instar de l'expressionnisme ambiant, l'ambiguïté retorse (la *Zweideutigkeit*)⁹ de toutes les affaires humaines, Barth et Heidegger se méfient des réponses traditionnelles, que l'histoire venait à leurs yeux de discréditer, celles qui célèbrent les réalisations de la raison, de la « culture » et de la science qui s'inscriraient dans la tradition de ce que Barth et Heidegger dénomment péjorativement la « métaphysique ». C'est de cette rationalité humaine et métaphysique que la Grande Guerre aurait sonné le glas. Assurément, les réponses de Barth et de Heidegger (si tant est que l'on puisse parler de réponse !) ne sont pas les mêmes : selon Barth il faut s'en remettre à l'impossible possibilité de la foi et pour Heidegger il faut réveiller, contre la métaphysique, la question de l'être.¹⁰ Il reste que Heidegger dira aussi, très barthiennement, que « seul un dieu peut encore nous sauver »¹¹ et qu'il est à l'affût d'un tournant (*Kehre*) ou d'une « faveur de l'être » qui soit autre chose qu'une idole ou une construction de la raison humaine.

La pensée de Barth est aussi théocentrique que celle de Heidegger est ontocentrique et dans les deux cas, Dieu ou l'être qu'il s'agit de penser ne seront jamais donnés comme des choses, identifiables et reconnaissables. L'effort essentiel de Barth et de Heidegger, qui avouent tous deux préférer les questions aux réponses, est de décentrer l'homme, de le comprendre à partir de son incertitude (*Beunruhigung*) insurmontable et de l'appeler à une conversion, un *Umdenken*, dit Barth,¹² une *Kehre*, dirait Heidegger (le théologien se sert volontiers ici d'un terme plus philosophique et le philosophe d'un terme plus religieux !). Leurs adversaires sont souvent les mêmes : la philosophie classique, résumée commodément sous le terme passe-partout de « métaphysique », la raison naturelle, l'obsession méthodologique et sa vaine quête d'assurance, l'autosuffisance de l'historicisme et les valeurs sacrosaintes de l'humanisme dont Barth et Heidegger dénoncent la vacuité. Ces conquêtes ou ces vaches sacrées de la

9 L'analyse célèbre de l'équivocité au § 37 de *Sein und Zeit* paraît faire écho à la dénonciation systématique de la *Zweideutigkeit* des choses humaines chez Barth. Voir *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 439 : « "Kirche" ist ein zweideutiges Faktum, haben wir gesehen. Die ganze Zweideutigkeit der menschlichen Natur und Kultur kommt in ihr zum Ausdruck ».

10 Sur le sens de ce réveil, voir mon essai récent *Comprendre Heidegger. L'espoir d'une autre conception de l'être* (Paris : Hermann, 2019).

11 Martin Heidegger, *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges 1910–1976*, Gesamtausgabe 16 (Frankfurt am Main : Klostermann, 2000), 671.

12 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 369, 404, 460. Pour Barth, cet appel à la pénitence procède d'une écoute de la voix de la conscience (*die Stimme des Gewissens*, 48). On sait l'importance de cette notion dans *Être et temps* (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 268), où la voix de la conscience, qui nous interpelle par son « silence » (*Schweigen*, 273), nous révèle notre « nullité » (*Nichtigkeit*, 283) essentielle. C'est un appel à « vouloir avoir une conscience » (*Gewissen-haben-wollen*, 288).

rationalité seulement humaine, ils les dénoncent avec une véhémence verbale caustique et fièrement destructrice (le *Römerbrief* parle volontiers, après Luther, de destruction),¹³ inusitée dans le monde universitaire. Dans cette destruction des idoles de l'homme contemporain, leurs inspirations sont aussi souvent les mêmes :¹⁴ Kierkegaard, Luther et Calvin, bien sûr, mais aussi Franz Overbeck et Nietzsche (Barth reprend volontiers l'idée de Nietzsche selon laquelle l'homme est quelque chose qui doit être dépassé¹⁵ tout comme sa critique du poids de l'historicisme, à telle enseigne qu'il reprendra même l'intitulé de la *Seconde inactuelle, De l'utilité de l'histoire*, dans le titre d'un de ses chapitres).¹⁶ Il y en aurait bien d'autres, dont Dostoïevski et Hölderlin.¹⁷

13 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 404.

14 Voir *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 255 où Barth nomme expressément ses modèles: «l'implacabilité de Calvin, le courage dialectique de Kierkegaard, le respect [*Ehrfurcht*] d'Overbeck, la faim d'éternité de Dostoïevski et l'espérance de Blumhardt». On comparera cet aveu à celui du cours d'herméneutique de la facticité où Heidegger nomme ses propres héros: Luther, Aristote, Kierkegaard et Husserl (*L'Herméneutique de la facticité*, 5).

15 «Keine religiöse Erregung und Begeisterung kann mich täuschen darüber, was das bedeutet; nur ein neuer Mensch, die Überwindung des Menschen, das ewige Leben könnte mich von der Verlegenheit meines Menschseins befreien», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 264 ; voir aussi 458 – 61, 473.

16 «Vom Nutzen der Historie», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 126 – 35. En quoi consiste cette utilité de l'histoire? En elle-même, l'histoire est profondément inutile, répète Barth tout au long du *Römerbrief*. Elle est inutile tant qu'elle n'est comprise que comme «la succession des cultures, la diversité des individus, des temps, des institutions, comme un bourdonnement centrifuge ; elle n'est alors que non-sens» («wo Geschichte bloßes Nebeneinander von Kulturen oder Nacheinander von Epochen, bloße Mannigfaltigkeit *verschiedener* Unmittelbarkeiten, *verschiedener* Individuen, Zeiten, Verhältnisse und Institutionen, zentrifugales Wimmeln und Geschleudertwerden bloßer Erscheinungen, da ist sie Unsinn», 132). Une histoire qui n'est que contemplée n'est pas un passé qui parle, qui est compris et connu («darum noch keine redende, verstandene und erkannte Vergangenheit», 133). L'histoire des historiens qui compilent des faits, des événements et des cultures n'est pas pour Barth une histoire significative. L'histoire (*Historie*) ne peut avoir qu'une utilité à ses yeux : quand il lui arrive de *nous parler* (132). Il se produit alors entre l'histoire et le présent une contemporanéité («Gleichzeitiges», 132) qui peut guérir le caractère muet (ou l'aphasie) du passé et la surdité du présent. La seule et rare utilité de l'histoire réside en ceci que l'histoire peut porter le passé à la parole et le présent à l'écoute («das jene zum Reden und diese zum Hören bringen kann», 132). Cette contemporanéité du passé parlant et du présent écoutant est alors le fait d'un «Selbstgespräch», d'un dialogue de l'histoire avec elle-même qui à la fois supprime et accomplit le temps, car il annonce et pressent le non-historique, le non-visuelisable et l'incompréhensible qui incarne la fin et le commencement de toute histoire (132). Ce n'est que dans ce dialogue avec elle-même, pointant au-delà de l'histoire, que l'histoire a quelque utilité puisqu'elle nous révèle alors la signification de notre existence. La parole du passé a toujours le sens d'un oracle qui témoigne du sens de notre

Quand je parle du «manifeste herméneutique» de Barth dans le titre de ma modeste contribution, je me réclame d'une formule de Gadamer qui a dit du *Römerbrief*, en 1961 (donc immédiatement après la parution de *Vérité et méthode*), qu'il s'agissait, «en dépit de son aversion pour la réflexion méthodologique, d'une sorte de manifeste herméneutique».¹⁸

En quoi le *Römerbrief* est-il donc une sorte de manifeste herméneutique ? C'est à cette petite question que j'aimerais tenter de répondre ici, en sachant qu'il y a ou qu'il y aurait plusieurs façons de penser les liens entre «Barth et l'herméneutique». Il en est au moins trois :

1. sous un tel intitulé, on pourrait d'abord s'intéresser à la réception du *Römerbrief* de Barth en herméneutique, essentiellement chez des auteurs comme Heidegger, Gadamer et Ricœur, qui forment la sainte Trinité herméneutique (sans oublier Rudolf Bultmann, dont les liens avec Barth sont un sujet immense) ; c'est un travail qui reste à faire ;

2. on pourrait, deuxièmement, s'intéresser au jugement qu'a pu porter Barth sur l'herméneutique : on sait qu'il fut très critique de Heidegger (qui vivait et enseignait à Freiburg, une ville qui est très proche de Bâle) ; mais la question ne se pose pas vraiment pour ce qui est du *Römerbrief* puisqu'en 1919, Heidegger (et l'herméneutique) n'était pas connu ; dans la continuité de cet intérêt, on pourrait, on devrait aussi s'interroger sur la connaissance qu'avait Barth de l'herméneutique et plus particulièrement de l'herméneutique théologique. Barth a bien connu Schleiermacher, qui est souvent sa cible dans le *Römerbrief* (pour Barth, la foi ne relève pas d'une intuition ou d'un sentiment de l'infini et n'a rien à voir avec un sentiment de «dépendance totale»¹⁹), mais dont il est à d'autres égards l'héritier²⁰ (son insistance sur une intelligence du *Römerbrief* qui soit

Dasein («Zeugnis vom Sinn unsres Daseins Gegenwart werde», 133). Sinon l'histoire n'a pas de sens.

17 Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 370.

18 Hans-Georg Gadamer, «Hermeneutik und Historismus» (1961), in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2 (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 391 : «Insofern ist Karl Barths Römerbrief bei aller Abneigung gegen methodologische Reflexion eine Art hermeneutischen Manifests». Ce jugement de Gadamer est partiellement cité par Christophe Chalamet dans son ouvrage remarquable *Théologies dialectiques. Aux origines d'une révolution intellectuelle* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2015), 161.

19 Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 264, 304.

20 On entend un écho aux réflexions herméneutiques de Schleiermacher, un parmi plusieurs, quand Barth dit de l'Évangile du Dieu inconnu, celui qu'annoncerait l'*Épître aux Romains*, qu'il nous donne la possibilité de «mieux comprendre les religions à mystères que celles-ci ne se comprennent elles-mêmes», *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 187. La formule, bien connue, de l'herméneutique de Schleiermacher («mieux comprendre un autre qu'il ne s'est lui-même compris»)

existentiell en est le témoignage le plus éloquent), peut-être Dilthey, et une lecture attentive pourrait montrer qu'il avait une bonne connaissance de l'herméneutique piétiste du XVIII^e siècle, que Gadamer s'efforcera de réhabiliter dans *Vérité et méthode*, car elle aurait mis l'accent sur la *subtilitas* de l'application en herméneutique (le jugement de Barth sera plus critique, car pour lui l'accent mis sur la piété intérieure ne suffit pas et resterait une affaire « trop humaine », suivant une autre formule de Nietzsche que Barth aime beaucoup) ; à ma connaissance, ce travail reste aussi à faire ;

3. troisièmement, et c'est cette perspective que j'adopterai, car elle m'apparaît plus féconde, on peut s'intéresser au caractère intrinsèquement herméneutique du *Römerbrief*, c'est-à-dire à la manière dont le *Römerbrief* met lui-même en œuvre une herméneutique qui anticipe et aura nourri certains des développements de l'herméneutique plus tardive.

2 Une herméneutique fusionnée avec la chose du texte

En quoi le *Römerbrief* est-il donc un « manifeste herméneutique » ? Pour ceux qui s'intéressent à la philologie, et le Barth du *Römerbrief* ne semble pas en faire partie, le terme d'herméneutique n'apparaît pas une seule fois dans le *Römerbrief* (je pense bien que le terme de « manifeste » ne s'y trouve pas non plus, même si c'est un terme combatif qui lui aurait bien convenu). À bien des égards, le *Römerbrief* est étranger aux considérations herméneutiques si l'on entend par là, au sens classique de l'herméneutique, une réflexion qui accorderait beaucoup d'attention aux conditions de possibilité d'une interprétation valide et au contexte historique des écrits qui l'intéressent. En vérité, c'est une nouvelle conception de l'herméneutique qui voit le jour dans le *Römerbrief*.

Bien évidemment, le *Römerbrief* est un traité herméneutique en ce qu'il propose une « interprétation », une *Auslegung*, de l'*Épître aux Romains*, commentée mot à mot (du moins en principe, car il est plusieurs passages du texte de Paul que Barth passe sous silence, dont certains qu'il interprète même à contresens ; j'y reviendrai plus loin). Cela est assez banal, dira-t-on. Ce qui l'est moins, c'est que l'herméneutique de Barth est à ce point vouée à son texte qu'elle reprend dans son intitulé le titre même du texte qu'elle veut exposer : *L'Épître aux Romains, Der Römerbrief*. L'ouvrage ne comporte aucun sous-titre

réapparaît en *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 538. Selon Christophe Chalamet, le dernier Barth se serait rapproché de Schleiermacher (*Théologies dialectiques*, 297).

qui viendrait indiquer la direction ou la tendance de l'interprétation. Cette *fusion* du commentaire avec son œuvre est en soi déjà remarquable. Il ne viendrait, je crois, à l'esprit d'aucun exégète de Descartes ou de Kant d'intituler son commentaire «*Méditations métaphysiques*» ou «*La Critique de la raison pure*». Le titre «*Der Römerbrief*» accomplit ainsi une fusion d'horizons, ceux de Paul et de Barth, et, plus fondamentalement encore, entre le commentaire et la chose de son texte.

Cette fusion avec la chose du texte, Barth dit, dans la célèbre et très herméneutique préface à la deuxième édition (dont je soupçonne qu'il s'agit du seul texte de Barth que certains herméneutes auront lu), qu'elle résume ce qu'il entend par une *compréhension* et une *explication* authentique (texte précieux, car de telles réflexions sur le comprendre et l'expliquer sont plutôt rares chez lui). Il le fait en se réclamant de Luther et surtout de Calvin :

Eigentliches Verstehen und Erklären nenne ich diejenige Tätigkeit, die Luther in seinen Auslegungen mit intuitiver Sicherheit geübt, die sich Calvin sichtlich systematisch zum Ziel seiner Exegese gesetzt, die von den Neueren besonders Hoffmann, J. T. Beck, Godet und Schlatter wenigstens deutlich angestrebt haben.²¹

Barth oppose volontiers cette *assurance intuitive* de Luther et la *Sachlichkeit* de Calvin à la méthode de son contemporain Adolf Jülicher (qui est souvent son souffre-douleur dans le *Römerbrief* ; Jülicher a rédigé un compte rendu critique de la première édition du *Römerbrief*, où il lui reprochait son caractère arbitraire et sa méconnaissance des résultats de la critique historique)²² :

Man lege nun einmal z. B. Jülicher neben Calvin. Wie energisch geht der Letztere zu Werk, seinen Text, nachdem auch er gewissenhaft festgestellt, "was da steht", *nach* zu denken, d. h. sich solange mit ihm auseinander zu setzen, bis die Mauer zwischen dem 1. und dem 16. Jahrhundert *transparent* wird, bis Paulus dort *redet* und der Mensch des 16. Jahrhunderts *hört*, bis das Gespräch zwischen Urkunde und Leser ganz auf die *Sache* (die hier und dort keine verschiedene sein *kann!*) konzentriert ist!²³

21 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xvii. «J'appelle compréhension et explications authentiques l'activité même que Luther a exercée avec une certitude intuitive dans ses interprétations, l'activité que Calvin, visiblement, s'est assignée systématiquement comme but de son exégèse, et à laquelle, du moins, ont aspiré nettement, parmi les modernes, surtout Hofmann, J. T. Beck, Godet et Schlatter», *L'Épître aux Romains*, 14.

22 Voir Adolf Jülicher, «Ein moderner Paulus-Ausleger», *Christliche Welt* 34 (1920), no. 29, 453–57 ; repris in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, Teil 1 : *Karl Barth, Heinrich Barth, Emil Brunner*, éd. Jürgen Moltmann (Gütersloh : Kaiser, 1962, ⁵1995), 87–98.

23 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xvii. «Il n'est que de comparer, par exemple, Jülicher à Calvin. Avec quelle énergie ce dernier se met-il à l'œuvre, afin de penser son texte jusqu'au bout, après

Cette description appuyée correspond en tous points à ce que l'herméneutique entend par une fusion d'horizons :

1. une interprétation réussie se *fusionne* toujours selon Gadamer avec la *chose* de son texte, sa *Sache*, son fond ;
2. elle prend la forme d'une *explication* sur le fond (*Auseinandersetzung*) et d'un *dialogue* (*Gespräch*) avec elle,
3. qui nous permette d'*entendre* (*Hören* ; ce sera d'ailleurs le dernier mot du *Römerbrief* de Barth : «Wer Ohren hat, zu hören, der hört»²⁴) ce que le texte a à nous dire,
4. sans se soucier de la distance historique qui nous en sépare, mieux, en la supprimant totalement.

Cette herméneutique qui vise directement la *vérité* du texte, ce qu'il a à nous dire et la manière dont il anéantit nos certitudes, est celle que pratique magistralement le *Römerbrief* : elle se veut une écoute passionnée de la chose du texte, qui s'encombre rarement de considérations philologiques, historiques ou herméneutiques (qu'on ne trouve guère que dans ses préfaces). Barth ne commence pas non plus son commentaire en nous prodiguant des considérations sur le «contexte» ou le style littéraire du *Römerbrief*. On n'y trouve qu'assez parcimonieusement des explications du texte grec, comme on a l'habitude d'en trouver dans les exégèses historico-critiques. Rien de tout cela ne semble intéresser Barth, tout voué qu'il est à la vérité du texte. Ironie des ironies, il est même rarement question des *Römer* dans le *Römerbrief* ! Ce sont en tout cas des destinataires bien désincarnés, car Paul s'adresserait, de fait, à tous les hommes et à tous les temps. Non, dit Barth, ce n'est pas aux Romains ou pas d'abord à eux que Paul s'adresserait, car nous sommes tous ces Romains.

Barth le souligne dès la première phrase du texte de la Préface à la première édition de 1919 :

Paulus hat als Sohn seiner Zeit zu seinen Zeitgenossen geredet. Aber *viel* [c'est Barth qui souligne] wichtiger als diese Wahrheit ist die andere, daß er als Prophet und Apostel des Gottesreiches zu allen Menschen aller Zeiten redet.²⁵

avoir constaté, lui aussi, scrupuleusement 'ce qui s'y trouve', autrement dit, afin de s'expliquer avec lui, de sorte que le mur entre le I^{er} et le XVI^e siècle devienne *transparent*, que là-bas l'apôtre Paul *parle* et qu'ici l'homme du XVI^e siècle *entende* et que le dialogue entre le document et le lecteur soit entièrement concentré sur la *chose* (qui, ici et là-bas, ne *peut* pas être différent!)), *L'Épître aux Romains*, 14 (trad. modifiée).

²⁴ «Que celui qui a des oreilles pour entendre entende», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 566.

²⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xi. «C'est à ses contemporains que l'apôtre Paul s'est adressé en tant que fils de son temps. Cependant, beaucoup plus importante que celle-ci est cette autre

Tout le programme herméneutique de Barth et sa critique de la théologie de son temps s'annonce dans ces lignes: le *Römerbrief* de Paul est un texte qui s'adresse à tous les hommes et il nous interpelle directement, ici et maintenant, ébranlant toutes nos certitudes. C'est un écho à l'idée de contemporanéité (*Gleichzeitigkeit*) de Kierkegaard que Gadamer et Ricœur ont eux-mêmes reprise dans leurs herméneutiques, quand ils ont insisté sur l'application et l'ébranlement qui s'accompliraient en toute interprétation («Tu dois changer ta vie!»). C'est de cette vérité, à la fois éternelle et éminemment contemporaine, que Barth appelle souvent «existentielle», que l'herméneutique du *Römerbrief* veut traiter. Cette vérité, avec laquelle le *Römerbrief* veut s'expliquer et qu'il veut re-présenter (*darstellen*, dirait Gadamer) à ses contemporains pour qu'elle puisse à nouveau être entendue, est infiniment plus importante que toute méthode. Vérité et méthode est donc un titre que Barth se serait peut-être volontiers approprié et qui veut un peu dire chez lui : la vérité décapante et intemporelle (et justement parce qu'il y est question du point de vue de l'éternité) du *Römerbrief* est infiniment plus déterminante que toute méthode historisante qui voudrait situer l'Épître dans son douillet petit contexte historique.

C'est dans cette mise en évidence d'une vérité qui précède et qui serait indépendante de toute méthode d'interprétation que réside le véritable manifeste herméneutique de Barth. Elle se traduit par une déconsidération ou «destruction» de l'historicisme et de sa fascination pour le contexte historique, que Barth ignore souverainement. Barth affiche même une certaine désinvolture au plan philologique, dont on peut presque penser qu'elle est voulue : il n'indique à peu près jamais la *source* des textes ou des commentaires qu'il cite. La plupart du temps, après une citation, il se contente de mentionner entre parenthèses le nom de l'auteur qu'il cite – Kierkegaard, D. Fr. Strauss, Luther – comme s'il présupposait que tout lecteur devait connaître ces sources (insolence que ne permettrait aucun directeur de thèse à ses étudiants aujourd'hui !). On ne trouve aucune référence complète dans les notes de bas de page. À ce titre aussi, le *Römerbrief* est beaucoup plus un «manifeste» de combat qu'un ouvrage savant ou une exégèse qui se veut scientifique.

En quoi consiste cette vérité éternelle du *Römerbrief* que veut «re-présenter» l'interprétation de Barth ? Barth y revient souvent dans son *Römerbrief*.²⁶ Le texte

vérité : en tant que prophète et qu'apôtre du Royaume de Dieu, c'est à tous les hommes de tous les temps qu'il s'adresse», *L'Épître aux Romains*, 9. Sur l'herméneutique de Barth, l'étude la plus fouillée est celle de Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis : The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, WUNT 2/145 (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

²⁶ Je pense volontiers à ce passage emblématique du *Römerbrief* où Barth parle de «die in der Auferstehung aufbrechende Wahrheit der Begrenzung und Aufhebung des Menschen durch den

le plus célèbre où il le fait est bien entendu celui de la Préface à la seconde édition, où Barth dit, dans ce qui est sans doute une réponse à une petite remarque de Jülicher,²⁷ que

s'il a un système, il réside en ceci que je garde aussi inlassablement que possible sous les yeux, aussi bien dans sa signification négative que positive, ce que Kierkegaard a appelé la 'différence qualitative infinie' entre le temps et l'éternité. 'Dieu est au ciel et toi tu es sur terre'.²⁸

Barth abat ici ses cartes et dit dans quelle perspective (avec quel «préjugé») il veut faire parler le texte. Ce qui me frappe dans ce texte souvent commenté, c'est son caractère herméneutique, qui est très évident si on tient compte de la phrase qui précède immédiatement cette déclaration qui amène Barth à parler de son «système» (l'herméneutique dit toujours qu'il faut interpréter les textes à partir de leur contexte). Barth dit en effet : «Le soupçon, selon lequel j'introduirais par mon interprétation plus de choses dans le texte que je n'en extrairais [*der Ver-*

unbekannten Gott», de «la vérité, apparaissant dans la résurrection, de la limitation et de la suppression (*Aufhebung!*) de l'homme par le Dieu inconnu», 22. Il s'agit, dit Barth, d'une vérité bien connue (*ist bekannte Wahrheit*), mais que les humains s'acharneraient néanmoins à méconnaître.

27 Jülicher avait, en effet, remarqué dans son compte rendu de 1920 («Ein moderner Paulus-Ausleger», 96) que Barth était un ennemi juré «de tout ce qui s'apparente à un système, à de la philosophie ou de la théorie» : «Da der Ausleger hier allem, was nach System, Philosophie, Theorie schmeckt, todfreund, klare Fassungen, etwa im Gegensatz zu denen anderer Ausleger und wären es Luther, Calvin, Bengel, vermeidet und sich immer auf sein erneutes Gottesreich zurückzieht, wäre es möglich, daß man ihn da mit Unrecht der Abweichung von dem Meister bezichtigte».

28 «Der Verdacht, hier werde ein- als ausgelegt, ist ja wirklich das Naheliegendste, was man über meinen ganzen Versuch sagen kann. Ich habe dazu folgendes zu bemerken: Wenn ich ein "System" habe, so besteht er darin, daß ich das, was Kierkegaard den "unendlichen qualitativen Unterschied" von Zeit und Ewigkeit genannt hat, in seiner negativen und positiven Bedeutung möglichst beharrlich im Auge behalte. "Gott ist im Himmel und du auf Erden." Die Beziehung dieses Gottes zu diesem Menschen ist für mich das Thema der Bibel und die Summe der Philosophie in Einem», Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xx ; «Le soupçon, selon lequel j'introduis par mon interprétation plus de choses dans le texte que je n'en extrais, est bel et bien la chose la plus aisée que l'on puisse dire au sujet de ma tentative entière. À cet égard, il me faut faire la remarque suivante : si j'ai un "système", il consiste en ce que je tiens mon regard fixé aussi opiniâtrément que possible sur ce que Kierkegaard a nommé la "différence qualitative infinie" du temps et de l'éternité, et cela dans sa signification négative et positive. "Dieu est dans les cieux, et toi, tu es sur la terre". La relation entre ce Dieu-ci et cet homme-ci, constitue pour moi, tout ensemble, le thème de la Bible et la somme de la philosophie», *L'Épître aux Romains*, 17 (trad. modifiée).

dacht, hier werde mehr ein- als ausgelegt], est la chose la plus facile que l'on puisse faire valoir à propos de tout projet». C'est tout de suite après avoir évoqué cette «violence interprétative» de sa lecture (que lui reprochaient plusieurs commentateurs, dont Jülicher) que Barth, provoqué, déclare : «à ce sujet, je n'ai qu'une remarque à faire; si j'ai un système, il consiste en ceci que je garde constamment sous les yeux ce que Kierkegaard a appelé la différence qualitative infinie entre le temps et l'éternité, aussi bien dans sa signification négative [mentionnée en premier !] que positive». C'est donc pour répondre à une objection herméneutique – voire l'objection herméneutique par excellence, celle de l'arbitraire de l'interprétation – que Barth en vient à parler, une fois n'est pas coutume, de son «système». Son sens herméneutique tombe sous le sens.

Ce n'est pas la seule chose qui me frappe dans ce passage prodigieux. Je suis aussi fasciné par ce que Barth dit immédiatement *après* avoir évoqué son «système» : «la relation de *ce* Dieu [qui est au ciel] à *cet* homme [qui est sur terre], la relation de *cet* homme à *ce* Dieu, c'est pour moi le thème de la Bible et en même temps la somme de la philosophie [*die Summe der Philosophie in Einem*]». C'est un texte formidable, parce que, contrairement à ce que l'on dit souvent et à ce que Barth semble lui-même suggérer par ailleurs, il n'y a pas de différence fondamentale ici entre la (bonne) théologie et la (bonne) philosophie.²⁹ Comme la théologie, la philosophie aurait pour tâche essentielle de penser la relation entre l'homme et son principe, en pensant d'abord, dans sa priorité de droit, la relation du principe à l'homme. C'est une conception superbement métaphysique de la philosophie que défend ici Barth et qui montre que son allergie à la métaphysique n'était peut-être pas aussi totale qu'il l'a laissé entendre.

3 Et l'arbitraire des interprétations de Barth ?

«Wir aber schauen – das *Unanschauliche*.»³⁰

En évoquant le reproche herméneutique selon lequel il introduirait parfois des choses dans son texte qui ne s'y trouveraient pas, reproche qu'il ne réfute pas vraiment, Barth semble reconnaître que son interprétation fait parfois violence au texte qu'il interprète. C'est en effet l'une des choses qui ne manquera pas de

²⁹ Voir aussi Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 446, où la dette de Paul envers la philosophie grecque est évoquée.

³⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 144.

saisir le lecteur du *Römerbrief* : Barth passe parfois, voire souvent, à côté du texte qu'il veut interpréter. Il serait fastidieux de faire une liste de ces coups de force interprétatifs tant ils sont légion. Je n'en évoquerai que deux qui m'apparaissent philosophiquement significatifs :

1. Cette déconsidération du texte commenté, je la retrouve d'abord dans l'interprétation que Barth propose du texte célèbre de Rm 1,20 où saint Paul dit que « ce qu'il y a d'invisible (*ta aorata*) depuis la création du monde (*apo ktiseôs kosmou*) se donne à voir à l'intelligence par ses œuvres (*tois poièmasin nooumena kathoratai*) ». Si ce verset n'est pas quelconque, c'est qu'on y voit souvent – avec raison – un élément de théologie naturelle dans l'épître aux Romains : la puissance invisible de Dieu (ses *aorata*) deviendrait visible à notre intelligence (*nooumena kathoratai*) par ses œuvres (*poièmata*), dont la beauté ferait signe vers le créateur. C'est une idée qui va cependant tout à fait à l'encontre de la lecture que propose Barth, car toute la Révélation du *Römerbrief* infligerait à ses yeux un démenti à la théologie naturelle et toute connaissance seulement humaine. Ce qu'il retient de Rm 1,20, c'est plutôt l'idée que l'invisibilité peut elle-même être aperçue (!), ce qui l'amène à traduire le texte de la manière suivante « Gottes Unanschaulichkeit kann geschaut werden » (« car, de Dieu, l'invisibilité peut être vue »).³¹ À mon sens, ce n'est pas du tout ce qu'affirme Paul qui dit que la puissance invisible de Dieu peut bel et bien être vue *dans ses œuvres visibles*. Qu'a à dire Barth à propos de ces œuvres (*poièmata*) dans ou travers lesquels nous pourrions voir Dieu ? Sa réponse est stupéfiante :

Was sind denn Gottes "Werke" in ihrer absoluten Rätselhaftigkeit (zoologischer Garten!) anderes als lauter Fragen, auf die es keine direkte Antwort gibt, auf die Gott allein, allein Gott selbst die Antwort ist? (Les « œuvres » de Dieu, dans leur caractère absolument énigmatique [jardin zoologique !], que sont-elles d'autre, sinon de pures questions pour lesquelles il n'est pas de réponse directe, pour lesquelles Dieu seul, Dieu lui-même, est la réponse ?).³²

Il me semble ici que Barth introduit sa propre aversion pour la théologie naturelle dans le texte de l'*Épître aux Romains* qui l'amène à l'interpréter à contresens.

2. Tout le chapitre 7 du *Römerbrief* de Barth est consacré au thème de la religion où Barth ne voit (et ne dénonce toujours) qu'une affaire humaine. Certes,

³¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 23 ; *L'Épître aux Romains*, 51. Sur le caractère décisif de cette vision de l'invisibilité de Dieu, telle que Barth l'entend (Dieu est *incognito*, inconnu, *absconditus*), donc de Rm 1,20, voir aussi *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 147, 573. Sur la prise de distance de Barth avec la théologie naturelle, voir Chalamet, *Théologies dialectiques*, 261.

³² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 23 ; *L'Épître aux Romains*, 51–2.

la religion est de toutes les possibilités humaines «la plus profonde, la plus pure, la plus vivifiante et la plus susceptible de transformations»,³³ mais elle reste une possibilité humaine et c'est à ce titre que l'Épître aux Romains doit la condamner. L'idée «dialectique» de Barth est certes que cette «condamnation» par Dieu de toute religion seulement humaine est ce qui la rachète (c'est en nous condamnant que Dieu nous sauve !), mais ce qui peut frapper l'herméneute consciencieux, c'est que cette problématique, développée par Barth sur près de cinquante pages,³⁴ n'est pas du tout celle qui concerne saint Paul au chapitre 7 de l'*Épître aux Romains*. Il y est plutôt question de la loi et du péché, péché qui se trouve associé aux convoitises de la chair. Or ce règne de la loi, et de la chair, Barth l'associe spontanément à la «possibilité religieuse»,³⁵ dont Barth a le souci de marquer la limite, la vanité et le caractère «anti-divin».

J'en resterai là, il y aurait d'autres exemples, mais on voit que dans cette double condamnation de la théologie rationnelle et de la possibilité religieuse, c'est davantage la pensée puissante de Barth qui se fait jour que le texte de Paul qu'elle veut commenter. La leçon à en tirer m'apparaît claire : si une interprétation peut se fusionner avec la chose du texte qu'elle a pour mission de présenter, elle doit d'abord se mettre à l'écoute (*hören* !) de ce qu'il a à dire et rendre justice au sens à interpréter, qui est celui du texte avant d'être celui du texte qui parle par l'interprète. C'est ce que Gadamer appellerait une «fusion contrôlée» des horizons, du texte et de l'interprète.

Il reste que Gadamer a très justement reconnu dans le *Römerbrief*³⁶ une puissante critique de l'historicisme qui avait gangréné la théologie, l'herméneutique et toutes les sciences humaines au XIX^e siècle, qui ne voulaient voir dans les œuvres de l'esprit que des productions culturelles qu'il faudrait comprendre à partir du «vécu» (*Erlebnis*) de leur époque. En déconstruisant l'autosuffisance de l'historicisme, Barth a redécouvert, grâce à la contemporanéité kierkegaardienne, que les œuvres du théologien et du philosophe nous prodi-

33 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 176ss.

34 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 230 – 76.

35 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 231 ; voir aussi : «Sur le Golgotha, ce qui est sacrifié à Dieu et abandonné, avec toutes les possibilités humaines, c'est la possibilité religieuse» (235). Est-ce bien ce que dit Paul ?

36 Perspicace, Gadamer reconnaîtra le même esprit dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* au sujet de laquelle il écrit : «Das großartige Riesenwerk Karl Barths, seine Kirchliche Dogmatik, trägt zu dem hermeneutischen Problem nirgends ausdrücklich und indirekt überall bei», *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2, 403. Il note le contraste avec Bultmann : «Etwas anders liegt die Sache bei Rudolf Bultmann, dem methodologische Erörterungen durchaus liegen und der in seinen 'Gesammelten Abhandlungen' mehrfach ausdrücklich zum Problem der Hermeneutik Stellung genommen hat», 403.

guent des vérités souverainement et éternellement indépendantes de toute méthode. Par son manifeste, Barth aura ainsi été l'une des muses de *Vérité et méthode* et il aura aidé la théologie comme la philosophie à redécouvrir une expérience de vérité essentielle.

4 L'herméneutique plus proche de Bultmann ? Pas vraiment

Si cette solidarité de l'herméneutique et de Barth peut surprendre, c'est que l'on pourrait soupçonner l'herméneutique d'être plus proche de Bultmann. Il est vrai que les liens entre Bultmann et l'herméneutique ont sans doute été plus étroits, pour des raisons personnelles et de fond. Les raisons personnelles sont bien connues : on sait que Bultmann fut un ami et admirateur de Heidegger, un mentor et un ami de Gadamer,³⁷ et un auteur sur lequel Ricœur a beaucoup écrit. Sur le fond, Bultmann a beaucoup parlé d'herméneutique, de compréhension et il était convaincu que la théologie avait beaucoup à apprendre d'une phénoménologie herméneutique comme celle de Heidegger. C'est pour cette raison que j'ai moi-même toujours été un avide et reconnaissant lecteur de Bultmann, mais ce qui peut décevoir l'herméneute philosophe, c'est la *théologie* de Bultmann, arc-boutée qu'elle est sur l'idée selon laquelle le discours « sur Dieu » ne serait toujours au fond qu'un discours sur l'homme et sur son incapacité à se comprendre lui-même. La foi n'apparaît alors que comme un éveil à l'authenticité possible de l'existence. Cela laisse le philosophe sur sa faim parce que, s'il veut lire des choses sur la finitude humaine et son incapacité à se comprendre elle-même, il peut en rester aux philosophes. Quand il fréquente les théologiens, il veut plutôt les entendre parler de leurs thèmes – Dieu, le salut, la christologie, la création, la trinité, l'ecclésiologie, etc. – et de leurs écrits fondateurs, si riches d'enseignements. De ce point de vue, la *théologie* de Bultmann, ses remarquables études exégétiques mises à part, peut décevoir les philosophes qui souhaitent trouver autre chose que de la philosophie chez un théologien. Ceci explique peut-être pourquoi la théologie de Barth bénéficie aujourd'hui d'une plus grande faveur que celle de Bultmann (Christophe Chalamet parle à cet égard

37 Sur les liens de Gadamer et Bultmann, voir mon étude « Gadamer and Bultmann », in *Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis*, eds. Petr Pokorný et Jan Roskovec, WUNT 153 (Tübingen : Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 121–43.

d'une certaine «renaissance barthienne»³⁸), ce qui n'était peut-être pas le cas quand j'étais étudiant. Le philosophe herméneute préfère que le théologien parle de théologie, car il aura toujours des choses à apprendre d'elle.³⁹

38 Chalamet, *Théologies dialectiques*, 15, qui pense plus particulièrement au monde anglophone.

39 À cet égard, on ne peut qu'être d'accord avec la mise en garde de Barth dans la Préface à la seconde édition du *Römerbrief*, xv : «Wenn ich nicht sehr irre [...], haben wir Theologen übrigens das Interesse der 'Laien' dann am meisten, wenn wir uns am wenigstens ausdrücklich und absichtlich an sie wenden, sondern einfach unsrer Sache leben, wie es jeder ehrliche Handwerker tut»; «Si je ne me trompe pas complètement [...], le moment, du reste, où nous autres théologiens, nous suscitons le plus l'intérêt des 'laïques', c'est lorsque nous nous adressons le moins expressément et le moins intentionnellement à eux et que, au contraire, nous vivons tout simplement notre affaire, comme le fait tout honnête artisan», *L'Épître aux Romains*, 12 (trad. modifiée).

Bruce McCormack

An Anti-Metaphysical Manifesto: Karl Barth's Romans Commentary in its Second Edition

Abstract: For Karl Barth, 'metaphysics' in theology refers to the practice of speaking of God and the human on a basis other than Christology (i.e. cosmology or anthropology). This essay sketches the results of Barth's grounding of the basic concept of God and of the human in the event of cross/resurrection. God and the human *are* what they are in this event in which God encounters the human and the human knows and acknowledges God. Here, already in *Romans*, God's "being" is a being in the act of self-speaking and human "being" is a being in the act of hearing the divine address.

1 Introduction

"Man finds himself in this world in prison. [...] Man is his own lord. His unity with God has been torn in such a way as to make its restoration inconceivable. His creatureliness is his shackle. His sin is his guilt. His death is his fate. His world is a formless and surging chaos of the powers of nature, of the soul and a few others. His life is appearance. That is our situation. [...] The gospel [...] speaks of God as he is; it thinks God himself, him alone. It speaks of the Creator who becomes our Redeemer, and of the Redeemer who is our Creator. It intends wholly to convert us. It announces the transformation of our creatureliness in freedom, the forgiveness of our sins, the victory of life over death, the return of that which was lost. It is the warning cry, the lighthouse [which tells] of a new world that is coming. What does all of that mean? Here and now, bound as we are to this and that, we cannot know it. We can only hear it, and the reflection on God created by the gospel hears it. The world does not cease to be world and man remains man in hearing it. It remains to him to bear the entire burden of sin and the entire curse of death. Let there be no self-delusion with regard to the facts of our Da-Sein and our So-Sein! The resurrection, which is our exit is also our barrier. But this barrier is also our exit! The No which meets us is the No of God. What we lack is just what helps us. What shuts us in is new country. Precisely because God's No! is complete, it is also His Yes!"¹

¹ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1984), 12–3.

This rich passage, comprising a comment on Romans 1:16–17, contains *in nuce* many of the central themes of Karl Barth's *Romans*.² Eschatology is present here; a thoroughly "consistent eschatology" which makes the human situation in this world to be a life lived in a prison. The gospel is present here, a surprisingly positive word which shocks us in its confidence since it speaks of God, of the true God "as he is." The gospel, Barth says, bears witness to "God himself, God alone."³ And again, the gospel is indeed heard but heard by those who remain in prison, whose situation is not changed by their hearing but who understand that the great No! of God which encounters us in the message of resurrection is the No! which is also a Yes and Amen, an abiding Yes which endures forever. The No serves the Yes; the beginning and end of God's ways with the human race is gracious. And all this can be said because the coming God to whom Barth points in his commentary is the God whose "wholly otherness" is grounded Christologically and *not* metaphysically.⁴

Now there is a depth of meaning packed into that last sentence which requires a good bit of unpacking. What does it mean to say that Barth is not doing "metaphysics"? What is the understanding of "metaphysics" which is presupposed in that negation? Traditionally, both in theology and philosophy, "met-

2 I should note that, since writing this essay two years ago, I have given up the practice of speaking of Barth's mature theology, at least, as "anti-metaphysical" – even though that characterization has an excellent pedigree in the Barth literature. See Eberhard Jüngel, "Einführung in Leben und Werk Karl Barths," in *Barth-Studien* (Zürich, Köln: Benziger Verlag, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982), 53. I have given it up because I have become convinced that Barth's protest against "metaphysics" was always limited to the metaphysics of the Fathers (much as Ritschl's had been) and that the ontology he would one day elaborate constitutes a new form of Christologically-grounded metaphysics rather than an alternative to every conceivable metaphysics. But, as I say, this essay stands in a strong interpretive line for which much can still be said. And so I have chosen to publish it as I first wrote it – as a testimony to a point of view which was mine for many years.

3 Three years later, in his first cycle of lectures on dogmatics, Barth would say, "The content of revelation is God alone, God in His entirety, God Himself [*Gott allein, Gott ganz, Gott selber*]." Karl Barth, "Unterricht in der christlichen Religion," *Erster Band: Prolegomena, 1924* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 105. Because this statement extends the line of reflection contained in the passage from *Romans* cited above, it is my view that it is relevant for interpreting the intent which informed the latter.

4 Werner M. Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastaseologie in Karl Barths zweitem "Römerbrief"* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1987), 16: "[...] in Barth, the wholly other God is a Christologically acquired category." Ruschke says this in order to point out that Barth was in no way dependent upon Rudolf Otto for his use of the phrases "wholly other" and "wholly otherness" – both of which emerge already in his pre-war writings. And their emergence is, as Ruschke rightly says, Christologically-grounded – however true it might be that the Christology with which Barth worked in this phrase was quite thin.

aphysics” was understood as thought and speech about the “being” of God, of persons and of things. And for that reason, it was treated as more or less equivalent in its usage to the word “ontology.” It is Barth’s great achievement in his second *Romans* commentary to have laid a foundation for a clear distinction of theological ontology from metaphysics. This is not at all to say that he develops a theological ontology in his commentary! Far from it! But the foundation for the theological ontology he would one day elaborate was already laid here – and it is a foundation that is strictly “non-metaphysical” in Barth’s sense. In Barth’s sense! “Metaphysics,” as Barth used the term is a way of doing ontology which seeks to find its ultimate ground in generally-valid principles; principles which can be understood and discussed in the public arena. It consists in a process of inferential reasoning which moves from observed phenomena to “being.” To do ontology in a “non-metaphysical” way, on the other hand, would be to dispense with the construction of generally-valid principles on the basis of a starting-point in either cosmology (as occurred in the pre-modern church through the centuries) or in anthropology (which occurred in various ways in the modern period). It would make the first question to be asked in theological ontology to be not *what* is God? or even *who* is God? It would make the first question to be: *where* is God? Where is the “being” of God made known as it truly is? That would be the “place” to look for help in developing a truly *theological* ontology if, indeed, there were such a “place.”⁵ It would be a “place” in which that which belongs to the phenomenal stands in the service of a “self-giving” on the part of One who cannot be directly identified with it. What Barth has suggested in the passage I read at the outset is that there is indeed such a “place.” And it consists finally – in this work at least – in a single complex event: viz. the cross and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

I said a moment ago that the “wholly otherness” of God is grounded Christologically and not metaphysically. Now I am in a position to explain what I mean. That the category of “wholly otherness” in the second *Romans* is not a

5 See on this point Alexandra Pârvan and Bruce L. McCormack, “Immutability, (Im)passibility and Suffering: Steps Towards a ‘Psychological’ Ontology of God,” *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie* 59 (2017): 1–25. That the question “where is God?” is the most basic question to be asked in relation to divine “being” is not a new insight, however. It is basic to Eberhard Jüngel’s brilliant “paraphrase of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity whose title is not intended to identify God’s ‘being’ with ‘becoming’ but is intended rather to suggest that “God’s being is ontologically localized.” See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden: Verantwortliche Rede vom Sein Gottes bei Karl Barth, Eine Paraphrase*, 2nd improved edition (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1967), iii; *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), section 6 “Where is God?”, 49–55; section 7 “Talk about the Death of God as the Theological Answer to the Question: Where is God?,” 55–105; section 11 “The Word as the Place of the Conceivability of God,” 152–69.

metaphysical category means that it was not acquired by means of an abstractive reasoning which seeks to reason from the limitations of created being to the (alleged) perfection of uncreated being; from the multiplicity and diversity of embodied creatures to simplicity and unity; from passibility (due to that subjection to growth, maturation, degeneration and death which comes with all bodily life known to us) to impassibility – as had been the case with ancient metaphysics. “Wholly otherness” here is not the consequence of an apophatic mode of reflection. That point is rarely understood, especially among English-language Barth scholars, but it is true. The distinction between the apophatic and the cataphatic is, in truth, wholly inapplicable to Barth because he did not occupy the same epistemic ground as did those ancient theologians who devised these thought-forms. Karl Barth’s *Denkform* consisted in a faithful and patient “following after” of God’s Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. It follows that the “place” from which he learned this *Nachdenken* was the “place” of the divine act of Self-revelation. And so: “wholly otherness” in his hands is not the “wholly otherness” of the simple and impassible deity of the ancients, of the unrevealed and, I would say, the “un-reveal-able” God of classical theism. It is rather the “wholly otherness” of God precisely in the modality of His Self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Expressed now more positively: Barth’s starting-point for theological reflection in *Romans*, the “place” in which he thought himself to find the true God and from which he tried to speak, was found in a definitive act of revelation through which a relation is established from God’s side to a creaturely medium – a relation which preserves the “wholly otherness” of God as the Self-revealing Subject who resists becoming directly intuitable. At this point in time, the unintuitability of the fully present God in the impenetrable “veil” of the death of Jesus was as far as Barth was able to think through the problem. Within a very few short years, he would come to a further, more positive conclusion: viz. that the relation established in the act of Self-unveiling in and through the history of Jesus was a relation that is proper to the eternal identity of the God of Israel – so that one cannot speak of the God of Israel *Christianly* without reference to this relation. When that happened (just three years later), he would be able to say “[...] God would not be God if the relation to the human were not inherent to Him [*von Haus aus* – “innate”].”⁶ He would have begun to do a bit of theological ontology. But, for now, the act of revelation was condensed into a single event; the event in which the resurrection of Jesus functions as the divine light which shines upon his death to reveal its meaning. That is the Self-speaking of God in *Romans* II – a

⁶ Barth, “*Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*”: *Prolegomena*, 157. Cf. 156: “The relation of God to the human is no accidental one; it is necessarily contained and grounded in God’s *essence*.”

“trans-historical event which embraces elements both of the historical and the non-historical. That event – and the nature of that event – is what preserves the Self-speaking God in unintuitability. But we must not fail to see here that the Self-revelation of God does find (or rather creates) those with “ears to hear” what is said here. And so, there are indeed hearers of the Word. The Barth of *Romans* II was no theological skeptic. His emphasis on “wholly otherness” did not end in agnosticism. For what he did have in place was a clear *structure* of divine revelation capable of witnessing to the dialectic of God’s hiddenness and revealedness in God’s Self-revelation.

Admittedly, it is not easy to see all that I have just described in Barth’s *Romans* – unless you possess a close knowledge of where Barth’s theologizing took him next, in the months and years immediately following the publication of the second *Romans*. First time readers of Barth will typically be overwhelmed by the volcanic nature of his speech – as well as by his polemics. *Romans* II is also, in its way, a deeply Nietzschean work. It is anti-religious, anti-clerical, anti-bourgeois morality, and indeed anti-capitalist. It is all of these things at the same time and in equal measure – and for this reason, Barth could never be co-opted for any particular platform devised by humans and pursued as ends in themselves. But the positive outlook, the joy and exuberance of a true witness to the new world that has dawned in the resurrection – that is there too. We do Barth a disservice if we miss these elements.

In what follows, I want to illustrate Barth’s anti-metaphysical outlook – and the foundations of his later theological ontology – through a focus on two elements: God and theological anthropology.

2 The Coming God

“As the *unknown* God, God is *known* in Jesus.”⁷ A paradoxical statement, to be sure! But the outcome is clear. God is known in Jesus. The questions are two: how is God known? And what can be known of God?

A clue can already be found in Paul. Barth’s *Romans* is, after all, a commentary, not a work in constructive theology. And it breathes throughout of the eschatological atmosphere in which Paul understood himself to exist. So what,

⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 88. Of this statement, Ruschke astutely observes: “This statement entails for Barth, on the one hand, that his talk of the unknown God is no metaphysical or philosophical speculation. It is rather the saying-after of the One known in revelation. And, on the other hand, the exclusive place of divine revelation is identified: Jesus Christ. ‘In Jesus Christ, the completely Other, the unknown, the inaccessible God has entered into this world’,” 297.

if anything, can be said of theological ontology in Paul? Above all, this: Paul's identity statements (such as that found in the Christ-hymn in Phil 2:6–11) cannot be reduced to mere “modes of appearance” – out of an understandable concern to say that Paul is not engaging in the kind of metaphysical reflection found in the later Greek Fathers. That much is true enough. But since Paul knows nothing of this later metaphysics, he cannot set out to negate it either. We would move closer to the truth if we were to say Paul does not distinguish being and act as the phrase “mere modes of appearance” might seem to imply. What God does simply is what God is. The thing is this: we can only register the asseveration of Paul from the later Greeks by presupposing the latter in its own sphere, bracketing it off so as, perhaps, to keep it viable. Virtually all “orthodox” readers of Paul do this because as theologians, if not as NT scholars, most are committed to Nicaea and probably to Chalcedon. My own view is that asseverations betray too great an openness to classical metaphysics – which cause us to miss the building-blocks of theological ontology Paul does put in place. And so: the *morphé theou* in Phil 2:6 is no mere mode of appearance in Paul's mind; a distinction between a mode of appearance and a mode of being would not have occurred to him.⁸ Any other view would leave unclear why “the name that is above all names” should be seen as having been “given” to Christ Jesus in his exaltation (2:9). But again, the bottom line is this: God is God in the doing of what God does with no qualification or reservation. Alternatively expressed: the answer to the question “who is God?” is, at the same time, the Pauline answer to the question “what is God?” To say, for example, that God is “the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom 4:24; 8:11) is to tell us, at the same time, what God is. As Francis Watson puts the point:

Divine being and divine action are inseparable from one another, and no distinction is drawn [by Paul] between how God is *in se* and *ad extra*. To attempt to speak of God *in se*, in abstraction from the world, would be to go behind the divine decree that pre-dates the world itself, the decision that God's son would be the first-born among many brothers and sisters, who were to be conformed to the image and to that end called, justified and glorified (Rom 8:29–30). But for Paul, there can be no reason to attempt to trace a divine being, preceding even the divine foreknowledge and foreordination. Fundamental to his Jewish heritage is a non-Platonic ontology in which being and act are identical. God is ‘the one who is’ (*ho on*, Exod 3:14, LXX) as the *agent* who is the subject of a range of verbs [...].⁹

⁸ See, for example, Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A & C Black, 1997), 126–29.

⁹ Francis Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity: Reflections on Pauline God-language, in Disagreement with J.D.G. Dunn,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 80 (2000): 10–16.

Watson is not wrong to find in Paul the rudiments of what we might reasonably call an actualistic and relational ontology – which reaches its peak when Watson declares that, in Paul, “[...]scriptural language is being put to a quite new use, which is to identify the act of God in the death of Jesus as an act of divine *self-giving*, and to find God’s own being and identity in that act.”¹⁰ And we would not expect one who comments on Paul to exceed the limits of a rudimentary ontology in line with Paul’s thinking.

And so, we circle back to Karl Barth. For him, the defining act of divine “being” is the resurrection, in and through which a relation is both constituted and disclosed to the Jesus’ who died to every human possibility – including the highest, the religious possibility.

The faithfulness of God is his entrance into and his abiding in the deepest human questionability and darkness. The life of Jesus, on the other hand, is perfect obedience to the will of this faithful God. He gives himself up to sinners as a sinner. He places himself completely under the judgment which rests upon the world. He places himself there, where God can only be present as the question of God. He takes the form of a servant. He goes to the cross and dies there. At the high point, at the goal of His way, he is a purely negative magnitude; not a genius, not the bearer of manifest or hidden psychic powers, not a hero, a leader, a poet or thinker and precisely in this negation (“my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”), precisely in that he *sacrifices* every brilliant, psychic, heroic, aesthetic, philosophical, every thinkable human possibility whatsoever to an impossible *more*, to an unintuitable *Other*, he is the one who fulfills to the uttermost those mounting human possibilities born witness to in the law and the prophets. *Therefore*, God exalted him, *therein* is he recognized as the Christ, *thereby* he becomes the light of the last things which shines forth above everyone and everything. Truly we see in him God’s faithfulness in the depths of hell. The Messiah is the end of the human. There too, precisely there, God is faithful. The new day of the righteousness of God wants to dawn with the day of the “sublated” human.¹¹

Who and what is God? God is the One who constitutes Jesus as the Christ through God’s faithfulness to him in the depths of hell, i. e. God’s relentless presence to him culminating in his resurrection. That is who God is in Barth’s *Romans*. That is what God is. God is the righteous God who demonstrates and establishes God’s righteousness through faithfulness to Jesus.

Are there other “places,” other sites of the divine Self-disclosure for the Barth of *Romans*? Yes. “The faithfulness of God is that divine persistence, in virtue of which there are, again and again, possibilities, occasions, witnesses to the knowledge of his righteousness. Among these points, Jesus of Nazareth is the one among these many points in whom the rest are recognized in their collective

¹⁰ Watson, “The Triune Divine Identity,” 108.

¹¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 71–72.

significance as the line, as the true red thread of history. Christ is the content of this knowledge; the righteousness of God itself.”¹² It is only in his light that we are able to recognize these other lights. Their light is reflected light. “The revealed and seen light of this one point is the hidden, the invisible light of all other points.”¹³ Barth’s later doctrine of the “lesser lights” would come full circle back to this conclusion, one already sounded in Barth’s second *Romans*.

Where metaphysics is concerned, Barth never looks away from the self-disclosure of God in raising Jesus from the dead. He does not seek to develop a concept of God on the basis of cosmology (with the ancient church) or anthropology (as with a good many modern theologians). His *Romans* functions as a self-consistent anti-metaphysical tract because it looks steadfastly to the death and resurrection of Christ. No other starting-point is permitted.

3 The De-Centering and Re-Centering of the Human

This is not the place for an in-depth treatment of Barth’s understanding of Paul’s concept of the “justification” of the ungodly. And yet, I must say something about it, at least, since Barth’s theological anthropology is embedded in it. Here, more than anywhere, Barth is right in saying: “Christianity which is not wholly and without remainder eschatology has nothing whatsoever to do with Christ.”¹⁴

Barth’s doctrine of justification in *Romans* II is eschatological without remainder and it is actualistic. Justification is the divine Yes contained in the No to the human as she is in this world; the eschatological Yes of God to the human who remains imprisoned in her strictly human possibilities – those possibilities to which Jesus died. Is the Yes in the No heard? Yes, it is. But it is heard by those whose awakening to faith is repeated moment by moment – or not. The latter possibility cannot be excluded. Faith, in any case, is never the secure possession of any human being in this world. Here there is no “having,” no “possessing.” In every moment, faith is present in an individual only if God wills that it be so. Consider the following passage (written as a comment on Rom 3:21–22):

¹² Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 70.

¹³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 71.

¹⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 298; cf. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 314.

The righteousness of God is the *Nevertheless!* with which God declares himself to be our God and reckons us for himself. And this *Nevertheless!* is incomprehensible, groundless, grounded only in itself, only in God, a *Nevertheless!* which is stripped of all “therefore.” For the will of God knows no “why?”. He wills, because he is God. The righteousness of God is *forgiveness*, a fundamental change in the relationship between God and the human. It is a declaration that human irreverence and insubordination and the situation of the world created through them are insignificant before him and do not hinder him from naming us his own, so that we might *be* his own. The righteousness of God is *justitia forensis, justitia aliena*: the Judge who is bound by nothing save his own right speaks. And as he *speaks*...so it is. He addresses his enemies as his friends. [...] The righteousness of God is the *Self-liberation* of the *truth* which we imprisoned (1:18), completely without regard for that which on our side is do-able, possible, or even only thinkable [...] The righteousness of God is the *standpoint in mid-air*, outside of all possible standpoints known to us; there where we are only still held by God, by God himself, by God alone, there where we are in his hand, for weal or woe.¹⁵

The faith by which we are justified in the here and now of our lives is not a “given.” And it never becomes a “given.” It is a “standpoint” suspended in the air. Humanly considered, it is an impossible place to “stand.” Suspended in mid-air, one can only fall. And yet God holds us there by the power of his spoken word and does so in the moment of encounter, in a “non-temporal time,” in a “spaceless place,” as “the impossible possibility.”¹⁶ So it is not the case in Barth’s doctrine of justification that God’s righteousness *was* his alone until he made it to be ours as well, until he made us somehow to share in it. It is and remains God’s *even as he justifies*. Righteousness does not pass over “into us” because the “faith” which receives it never becomes a predicate of the human who is encountered in this way. Faith is “ours” only in the moment in which we are “arrested” by the divine declaration. But it is the “predicate” only of the Christ in and through whom God speaks. Thus, the line separating sinner from saint is not a line which runs through so-called “believers.” It is a line which runs between Christ and ourselves. It is the Christ we encounter in the divine declaration who is justified; it is God’s act of relating to us in and through him which is our true self.

Thus, the empirical self available to our introspection is always and only the human imprisoned in her own devices and desires. This is the person who *is*, in the moment of encounter with the divine declaration, what she will be at the end of history. But only in that moment; a moment without “before” or “after.” She is not this in and for herself and will never become so in time. In and for herself,

¹⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 68.

¹⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 66.

she belongs to this world and its possibilities. And so: to understand this self “metaphysically,” to try to secure God’s relation by “locating” its *ad quem* in a “metaphysical subject” which we posit for ourselves is not only to miss the truth. It is, in fact, to falsify the truth. It is the empirical self suspended actualistically in mid-air who has a future. She alone. Listen again to what Barth says:

God “declares.” He declares *his* righteousness as the truth behind and above all of the righteousness and unrighteousness of men [and women]. He declares that we, his enemies, are his beloved children. He declares his decision [*Beschluß*] to establish his right in the comprehensive renewal of the heavens and the earth. This declaration is forensic, a judgment without cause or condition, grounded only in God himself. It is *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. To be sure: creation, creation of a something, creation of a real divine righteousness in us and in the world is this creation. For when God speaks, it happens. But *new creation* is this creation, not merely a new outbreak, a new pouring forth, a new unfolding of the “old, creative development” in which we will stand until the end of our days. Between the old and the new creation there stands always the end of our days, the end of this human and of this world.¹⁷

Anthropological metaphysics always takes its rise in the attempt to posit a final unity as the ground of a series of observed phenomena, in this case, of the phenomenal human. In the new creation, no such attempt is possible or necessary. The “unity” of the human is grounded in the relation which God establishes with the empirical human, a relation which may be actualistically realized in this world but whose future is grounded in God alone. That is why I call Barth’s anthropology *theological*. I mean this in the strict sense of “not metaphysical” because it is grounded in the God who is known only in that he encounters us in our sin and misery. “Through that which *he is not*, the human takes part in that which God is.”¹⁸ The I which I am not is the I who will be in the new world which is to come.

The human encountered by the Word is thus a person radically de-centered, a person who is not yet in herself what she will be. But already in Christ, in the turning of the ages which took place in him, she is also re-centered in the future, in the new human who is coming. By that faith alone which is never her secure possession, she is already what she will be.

¹⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 76.

¹⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 97.

4 Conclusion: Retrospect and Prospect

Barth's second *Romans* was a station on his way; a very important station since many of the decisions made here would remain in force. But it was not the end station. So what did he learn that remained a permanent gain to him and where-in did he later change his mind?

First, the changes of mind: the most important of these lay in the later shift from understanding "justification" as taking place in the here and now of the individual who is awakened – again and again – to faith to an understanding of "justification" as already effective for all in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Barth's later "Christological objectivism" was grounded in his doctrine of election in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/2 and realized in his doctrine of reconciliation in IV/1ff – of which "justification" is but one aspect. Two things are necessary to this development: first, the understanding of the cross as the death, the annihilation, the complete elimination of the "being" of the sinner. That is certainly new over against *Romans*. The second is the understanding of the resurrection of Jesus as "new creation." This is less new but the fact that it is fully realized in Christ means that the "being-in-becoming" of God is complete in Christ. God is no longer Jüngel's God whose "being" is in coming; he is instead the God whose "being" is a being in *this* becoming, the becoming that is the lived history of Jesus in 1–30 A.D. And with that, the consistent eschatology of *Romans* is given a more secure anchor in time, in the suffering of God on the cross and its overcoming in the resurrection. A second change of mind – which is grounded in Barth's later "Christological objectivism" – has to do with the residual nominalism registered in his claim that the will of God knows of no why?; that the Nevertheless! in which God declares God's Self to be our God and us to be God's is a decision grounded only in itself and stripped of all "therefore." That is a very dangerous speculation, in fact; and a speculation which belies (unconsciously, it must be said) Barth's anti-metaphysical outlook. God does nothing, I would say, without reason – though I would add that the reason for all of God's activity *ad extra* is already contained in what God is as self-giving, self-donating and self-emptying love. Nominalism is, at this point in time, a ghost which haunts Barth's otherwise very fine reflections on revelation and theological anthropology.

But there are also themes in the second *Romans* which would become a permanent part of Barth's legacy – and which we would, even now, do well to uphold. First of all, Barth's dialectic was attached to different Christologies through the years but its central achievement was never set aside. That central achievement consisted in the dialectic of veiling and unveiling which made revelation

unintuitable from the human side. Even if it is the case, as the later Barth seemed clearly to believe, that there took place in Jesus Christ a real communication to the eternal Word of God (the Logos) of those human properties which made a real suffering of God possible, this communication is *not, in the very nature of the case, directly intuitable*. The divine-human “subject” remains hidden in the veil of creaturely flesh; the communication to him takes place in hiddenness. So the dis-possessive account of revelation offered by Barth in *Romans II* was taken up in his dogmatics into a version of the two “natures” doctrine which secures its original motivations while, at the same time, rendering that old doctrine in a historicized way that overcame its originating metaphysical categories. Hypostatic union was replaced by an ongoing, actualistically-conceived hypostatic uniting. The history of Jesus was understood as the history of a triune God who remains other than that human history even as he takes it up into one of his “modes of being.”

I will end with this thought. I think Barth showed the better part of wisdom in seeking to overcome and eliminate the influence of classical metaphysics on Christian dogmatics. A dogmatics which does not start with the history of God in Jesus Christ as narrated in the Scriptures does not end with the real God and it does not end with the real human. It is just as true in matters of epistemology and ontology as it is in spiritual matters: “[...] no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). This is good wisdom in the 21st century, just as it was in the first and the twentieth.



III Historical Context

Peter Zocher

Vom «Schweizerwinkel» auf das «hohe, bewegte Meer». Karl Barth zwischen Safenwil und Göttingen

Abstract: The article explains Karl Barth's biographical context between 1911 and 1925 by means of some references and questions on the following topics: Barth's work as a pastor in Safenwil, the marriage between Nelly and Karl Barth, the family's move from Switzerland to Germany, Barth's political involvement in Safenwil and in Göttingen. The article warns against adopting stereotypical patterns of interpretation too quickly, even if they are partly based on later interpretations by Barth himself.

1 Einführung

Barth selbst war es, der vom ruhigen «Schweizerwinkel» im Vergleich zu dem «hohen, bewegten Meer» in Deutschland sprach, nachdem er 1919 von einem Vortrag dort in die Schweiz zurückgekommen war,¹ zwei Jahre, bevor er sich selbst auf diesem «Meer» wiederfinden sollte. Seine erste Römerbrief-Auslegung war Monate zuvor erschienen, und noch war nicht absehbar, dass es bald einen neuen, den zweiten «Römerbrief» Barths geben würde und dass der vormalige Safenwiler Pfarrer als Professor in Göttingen Vorlesungen über reformierte Theologie zu halten hätte.

Von diesen Jahren zwischen Safenwil und Göttingen und von der Entstehung der «Römerbriefe» Barths möchte ich im Folgenden berichten. Eine reine biographische Übersicht² kann nicht das Ziel der Ausführungen sein; böte eine hier nur mögliche Kurzfassung doch nichts Neues. Ich hoffe, Interessanteres zu präsentieren und einen wichtigeren Beitrag zu leisten, wenn ich mich darauf beschränke, Schlaglichte auf einzelne Punkte oder Szenen dieser beiden biographischen Stationen zu werfen. Jeder der vier folgenden kurzen Abschnitte wird

1 Karl Barth, «Vom Rechthaben und Unrechthaben» [1919], in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, hg. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt und Hans-Anton Drewes, Gesamtausgabe III (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 599–621, hier 614.

2 Dazu vgl. vor allem Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (München: Kaiser, 1986), 72–178; Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (München: Beck, 2018), 79–162.

mit einem Zitat Barths beginnen, von dem aus ich jeweils darlegen möchte, was mir besonders wichtig erscheint, wovor ich warnen möchte oder wo ich noch Desiderate der biographischen Forschung sehe. Manches, vielleicht das Meiste davon, bitte ich, eher als Frage oder Anregung denn als Feststellung zu verstehen.

2 Karl und Nelly Barth in Safenwil

Nelly ist in allem sehr dabei, ich muss es dir doch auch wieder einmal sagen [...], wieviel ich an ihr habe, von Monat zu Monat mehr, und wie sie mir eigentlich sehen und tragen hilft.³

Hier in Genf, wo er von 1909 bis 1911 an der deutschen reformierten Gemeinde die Stelle des *pasteur suffragant* bekleidete, lernte Barth seine Frau kennen, die seit 1905 mit ihrer Mutter und ihren Schwestern in der Stadt lebte. Nelly Hoffmann gehörte zum ersten Konfirmandinnen-Jahrgang, den Barth betreute, und vor seinem Weggang nach Safenwil verlobten sich beide. Die damals 17-Jährige blieb noch zwei Jahre bei ihrer Mutter in Genf und bei einer Gastfamilie in England, bevor sie nach der Hochzeit im März 1913 in das Safenwiler Pfarrhaus einzog.

Die gemeinsam dort verbrachten Jahre waren die glücklichste Zeit in der Ehe von Karl und Nelly Barth. Nach der Geburt der Tochter Franziska im Jahre 1914 kamen hier die Söhne Markus (1915), Christoph (1917) und spät auch noch Matthias (1921) zur Welt; einzig der jüngste Sohn Hans Jakob wurde erst in Göttingen geboren (1925). Selbstverständlich übernahm Nelly Barth den Hauptanteil an der Kindererziehung; sie führte mit Hilfe von im Haus tätigen «Mädchen» den Haushalt und wachte auch über die Finanzen. Ihrem Mann half sie auch sonst, so gut sie konnte. Vor allem mit ihrer musikalischen Begabung unterstützte sie die Gemeindegemeinschaft, sie leitete aber auch ein Bibelkränzchen, nahm regelmäßig an Predignachbesprechungen teil, organisierte Vertretungen für ihren abwesenden Mann, vertrat ihn als Gast mancher Veranstaltung selbst, und vieles mehr. In den Auseinandersetzungen um Barths Engagement für die Safenwiler Arbeiterinnen und Arbeiter stand sie ihm zur Seite und wurde deshalb selbst Gegenstand von Kritik und Unterstellungen. Sie sparte aber auch nicht mit Kritik am Stil oder der Verständlichkeit eines Vortrags oder einer Predigt – oder an den Entwürfen zum Vorwort der ersten «Römerbrief»-Auslegung! –, wenn diese ihr missfielen. Im Freundeskreis um Barth war sie selbstverständlich präsent; erhalten sind etwa

³ Brief an Eduard Thurneysen vom 19.9.1915. KBA 9270.48; Karl Barth und Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel*, vol. 1: 1913–1921, hg. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe V (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 84.

Fotos eines Ferienaufenthaltes mit den Ehepaaren Thurneysen und Pestalozzi in Risch am Zugersee und vom Bergli, dem Ferienhaus der Industriellen-Familie Pestalozzi.

Warum diese Beschreibung? Aus zwei Gründen:

Zum einen, um deutlich zu machen, dass «Safenwil» im Leben Barths mehr war als nur der Hintergrund seiner theologischen Wende oder der Schauplatz der «sozialistischen Reden» des «Genossen Pfarrer». Man sollte es sich klar machen, dass Barth hier zehn Jahre ganz normal als Pfarrer gewirkt hat; er hat hier ca. 500 Mal gepredigt, zehn Jahrgängen junger Menschen Konfirmandenunterricht gegeben und war in den verschiedensten Weisen seelsorgerlich tätig. Selbst unter den inzwischen komplett edierten «Vorträgen und kleineren Arbeiten» jener Jahre⁴ sind die dezidiert politischen Texte in der Minderheit. Bei jemandem, der von sich selber sagte, seine Theologie sei für die Gemeinde geschrieben, lohnt es doppelt, diese ganz «normale» Arbeit und seinen Alltag in der Gemeinde intensiv und nicht nur *en passant* zu betrachten.

Zum anderen deshalb, weil die Sicht auf die Ehe Barths von einer anderen Erzählung dominiert wird, für die der ältere Barth mitverantwortlich ist: Die Ehe mit Nelly sei eine Art (zu) schneller «Ersatz» für die auf elterlichen Druck aufgelöste Verbindung mit der Berner Jugendliebe Rösy Münger gewesen, von vornherein ein Missverständnis und daher nicht glücklich. So Barth später selbst, und so gut 50 Jahre später auch Eduard Thurneysen:

Mit Nelly ging die Ehe von Anfang an nicht gut. Nelly und Karl – «das sind halt zwei verschiedene Welten gewesen.» [...] Seine Frau sei ihm von Anfang an als schrecklich unständig vorgekommen. [...] Schon in Safenwil habe Barth darum erklärt, wenn Ferien mit Thurneysen und Pestalozzi angesetzt wurden: Er sei bereit, unter der einen Bedingung: «ohne Frauen»; [...]. So hätten sie – Karl, Ruedi Pestalozzi und er selbst – halt zu dritt Ferien gemacht.⁵

So derselbe Thurneysen, an den Barth die eingangs zitierten Zeilen gerichtet hatte!

Natürlich will ich nicht leugnen, dass die Ehe von Karl und Nelly Barth ab einem gewissen Zeitpunkt nicht mehr sehr harmonisch gewesen sein kann; allein: Eindeutige Zeugnisse darüber von Barth selbst gibt es erst aus den späteren Göttinger Jahren und gehäuft dann ab 1925/26. Inwieweit dabei die im Februar

⁴ Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, hg. Hans-Anton Drewes und Hinrich Stoevesandt, mit Herbert Helms und Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Gesamtausgabe III (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 361–738; Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*. ⁵ Eberhard Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth. Tagebuch 1965–1968* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 701 (Erinnerung vom 22.4.1969).

1925 erhaltene Nachricht vom frühen Tod Rösy Müngers und die ein Jahr später begonnene Beziehung zu Charlotte von Kirschbaum eine Rolle gespielt haben mögen, möchte ich hier gar nicht näher besprechen. Immerhin schreibt Barth aber auch im Februar 1926 noch, die «Geschichte» seiner Ehe sei bis dahin «bei allen Schwierigkeiten eine glückliche Geschichte gewesen»,⁶ und er schreibt dies an Charlotte von Kirschbaum!

Als Historiker habe ich anhand selbst geführter Interviews einsehen müssen, dass auch höchst respektable und intelligente Zeitzeugen Ereignisse und Abläufe in der Rückschau über Jahrzehnte mitunter sehr anders erinnern als sie tatsächlich stattgefunden haben können. Und ich habe gelernt, dass unter anderem deshalb beim Vorliegen unterschiedlicher Quellen die zeitlich früheren eine stärkere Beachtung verdienen, wenn dem nicht gute Gründe entgegenstehen. Nun mag man es ja so sehen, dass hier solche Gründe vorliegen. Sieht man es aber so, dann muss man auch eingestehen und erläutern, dass und warum Barth in zeitgenössischen Äußerungen über das Ende seiner Beziehung zu Rösy Münger, über seine Verlobung sowie über die ersten Jahre seiner Ehe enge und selbst engste Freunde offenbar mehr als einmal angelogen hat. Diese Konsequenz einer kritiklosen Übernahme der Sicht des späten Barth als «Wahrheit» wird in der Regel nicht ausbuchstabiert.

3 Karl Barth, Eduard Thurneysen und die Entstehung der «Römerbriefe»

Eduard Thurneysen [...] hat aber auch das ganze im Entstehen begriffene Manuskript gelesen, begutachtet, und sich durch Einschaltung zahlreicher vertiefender, erläuternder und verschärfender Korollarien, die ich meist fast unverändert übernommen habe, in sehr selbstloser Weise ein verborgenes Denkmal gesetzt. Kein Spezialist wird dahinter kommen, wo in unserer auch hier bewährten Arbeitsgemeinschaft die Gedanken des einen anfangen, die des andern aufhören.⁷

⁶ Karl Barth und Charlotte von Kirschbaum, *Briefwechsel*, Bd. 1 1925–1935, hg. Rolf-Joachim Erler, Gesamtausgabe V (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008), 24.

⁷ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, hg. Cornelis van der Kooi und Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 24. Der «bewährten Arbeitsgemeinschaft» war bereits ein Predigtband entsprungen, in dem es keine namentliche Zuordnung der einzelnen Predigten gab: Karl Barth und Eduard Thurneysen, *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* (Bern: G. A. Bäschlin, 1917).

Der unmittelbare Anstoß zur Beschäftigung mit dem Römerbrief ging, folgt man Barths eigener Erinnerung, auf Eduard Thurneysen zurück: Er sei es gewesen, schreibt Barth noch 1968, der ihm eines Tages zugeflüstert habe, man brauche «für Predigt, Unterricht und Seelsorge» eine «ganz andere» theologische Grundlegung. – Am nächsten Morgen habe er sich mit allem ihm «damals zugänglichen Rüstzeug» vor dem Römerbrief des Paulus wiedergefunden.⁸ Aus dieser Arbeit erwuchs Barths Römerbrief-Auslegung, deren Erscheinen 100 Jahre später den Anlass zum Karl Barth-Jahr 2019 und zu diesem Symposium bietet. Schon an diesem ersten «Römerbrief» Barths werden Thurneysens Zuhören, die Gespräche mit ihm und sicher auch von ihm und anderen vorgebrachte Korrekturvorschläge ihren Anteil haben. Schriftlich fixiert ist dies nicht, traf man sich doch 1916 bis 1918, als diese Auslegung geschrieben wurde, Woche für Woche, manchmal mehrfach, persönlich.

Die umfangreiche Mitarbeit Thurneysens am «Zweiten Römerbrief» Barths ist dagegen nachlesbar. 1920–21 war Thurneysen bereits Pfarrer in Bruggen im Kanton St. Gallen, und so erfolgte der Austausch in der Regel schriftlich. Dank der 2015 erschienenen vollständigen Edition der Briefe Thurneysens aus den Jahren 1920–21⁹ ist sein Anteil nun transparent. Mir scheint auch nach deren Kenntnisnahme, Barths eingangs zitierte Bemerkung trifft Umfang und Art dieser Mitarbeit recht genau: Die Edition belegt, dass Thurneysens Beiträge sich in diesem Rahmen bewegten. In den Worten der Herausgeberin:

Thurneysens inhaltliche Rolle im *Römerbrief* II-Projekt kann dahingehend zusammengefasst werden, dass seine Ergänzungen keine spektakulären Metaphern oder genialen Einfälle enthalten. Er hat aber unentbehrliche Arbeit geleistet: er hat das Buch, das mit großer Geschwindigkeit geschrieben [...] wurde, begleitet und wichtige Korrektur- und Ergänzungsarbeit geleistet.¹⁰

Dass Tolstaja bezüglich des Barth-Zitats zunächst jedoch von «Mystifikation» spricht und gar formuliert, dass es sich «gleichermaßen als Anerkennung und Verdeckung von Thurneysens Anteil am *Römerbrief* II deuten» lasse,¹¹ verwundert

8 Karl Barth, «Nachwort», in Heinz Bolli, hg., *Schleiermacher-Auswahl* (München, Hamburg: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1968), 290–312, hier 294–95.

9 Katja Tolstaja, hg., «*Das Römerbriefmanuskript habe ich gelesen*». *Eduard Thurneysens gesammelte Briefe und Kommentare aus der Entstehungszeit von Karl Barths Römerbrief II (1920–1921)* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015). – In den von ihm selbst edierten ersten beiden Bänden seines Briefwechsels mit Barth hat Thurneysen die darüber Aufschluss gebenden Passagen stark gekürzt oder ganz weggelassen.

10 Tolstaja, «*Das Römerbriefmanuskript habe ich gelesen*», 30.

11 Tolstaja, «*Das Römerbriefmanuskript habe ich gelesen*», 13.

demgegenüber ein wenig. Ich möchte dies zum Anlass nehmen, vor voreiligen Sensationsmeldungen in Bezug auf Barth zu warnen, und dies betrifft die Rolle Thurneysens beim Zustandekommen des zweiten «Römerbriefs» ebenso wie die Rolle Charlotte von Kirschbaums bei der Arbeit vor allem an der «Kirchlichen Dogmatik». Nicht hinter jedem Vorgang, der nicht restlos aufgeklärt wird oder werden kann, steckt deshalb ein abgründiges Geheimnis; im Allgemeinen nicht, und auch nicht bei Barth.

Damit soll keinesfalls bezweifelt werden, dass man den Beitrag von Eduard Thurneysen und mehr noch von Charlotte von Kirschbaum unbedingt würdigen muss. Aber *Mitarbeit* oder *Zuarbeit*, wie hilfreich, umfangreich und unentbehrlich sie auch gewesen sein mag, ist nicht gleichbedeutend damit, dass neben Barth noch jemand substantiell am Text *mitgeschrieben* hätte, weder im einen noch im anderen Fall.

Eine kurze Anmerkung noch zum Verhältnis der beiden «Römerbriefe» Barths, das ich schon deshalb nicht weiter beleuchte, weil es Gegenstand mehrerer anderer Beiträge in diesem Band ist. Mitunter gerät mir – nicht nur, aber auch in Veranstaltungen des Karl Barth-Jahres – der Brückenschlag vom ersten zum epochemachenden zweiten «Römerbrief» Barths zu rasch. Das Jubiläum macht sich am ersten fest, verhandelt wird aber in der Regel über den theologisch-geschichtlich ja sicherlich bedeutenderen zweiten «Römerbrief», und das oft unter der Hand, ganz so, als sei dieser eben doch nur eine zweite Auflage desselben Werkes. Zwar handelt es sich nicht um gegensätzliche, aber doch um recht verschiedene Bücher – nicht zuletzt ihr Autor hat großen Wert darauf gelegt.

4 Eine schwierige Entscheidung? – Der Wechsel nach Göttingen

Du kannst dir denken, wie es in mir und in Nelly mit mir rumort. Alle nur möglichen Bilder entrollen sich: der [...] «Abbau» hier, der Umzug mit Grenzschikanen, die Reise mit drei bis vier Unmündigen, die Ankunft in dem ehemaligen «Gasthaus», das laut Brief für den zukünftigen Professor bereit sei, und dann öffnet sich wie ein gähnender Schlund die Notwendigkeit, einem unbestimmten Haufen oder Häuflein deutscher Theologiestudenten Mitteilungen, irgendwelche (was nur für – und über was doch nur auch?) Mitteilungen zu machen. [...] Daneben dann: Definitiver Schluss mit allen klassischen Mittagessen, Kinder, die nicht genug Milch kriegen, in meiner Pfeife echtes Buchenlaub, Abgabe eines Drittels unserer Batzen an die verwünschten Westler, von denen sie ja z. T. auch herkommen sollen, Teilnahme von Markus und Stöffeli am nächsten Krieg. Weiter: seltsame Existenz als Säule reformiert-konfessioneller Bestrebungen, leise nahender Geruch von Konsistorialrätlichkeit, Bönzlein unter Bonzen, [...]. Weiter freilich auch: erfreulicher Übergang zu einer gewissen Weltlichkeit, heraus aus dem schweizerischen toten Winkel (o wie werde ich noch heulen

nach meinem stillen Safenwil!), endlich ein Publikum, zu dem eine dialektische Beziehung möglich ist, [...], Ausblick über die deutsche Tiefebene, Fahrten mit Expresszügen nach allen Richtungen, Besichtigung des nicht mehr allzu fernen Meeres, [...]!¹²

Zu diesem Abschnitt fasse ich mich kurz; schon im Zitat ist ja angedeutet, welche vielgestaltigen Überlegungen zum Pro und Contra man im Vorfeld des Wechsels nach Göttingen anstellte. Allein: Barth scheint sich nach meinem Eindruck schnell entschieden zu haben. Am 31. Januar 1921 kam die Anfrage aus Göttingen, am selben Tag schon fragte er seinen väterlichen Mentor und Freund Martin Rade um Rat – und wusste bereits, dass er wohl zusagen würde.

Barth nahm zwar auf einen zentralen Punkt Rücksicht, er lehnte nämlich die Annahme der preußisch-deutschen Staatsbürgerschaft, die automatisch auch für seine Familie gegolten hätte, ab. Im Übrigen aber entschied er den Wechsel vor allem im Blick auf seinen Beruf und die Möglichkeiten, die sich ihm dort boten. Seiner Frau fielen der Umzug, der Verlust des vertrauten Umfelds und dann auch das Neu-Eingewöhnen in Göttingen viel schwerer; aber auch sie ordnete solche Gesichtspunkte Barths beruflichem Fortkommen unter.

Man muss betonen, dass das alles nichts Besonderes ist. Es war in Zeiten der so gut wie ausschließlichen Erwerbstätigkeit des – männlichen – Vorstands der Familie praktisch selbstverständlich, so zu handeln. Dieser Punkt soll lediglich zeitlich vgreifend illustrieren, dass die wenige Jahre später sich im Hause Barth einstellende Dreieckskonstellation zwar auch im damaligen Umfeld eine gewisse Extravaganz aufweist. Allein: Die Leitlinie, an die sich alle Beteiligten bei der Suche nach einer Lösung hielten und die heute kaum noch Verständnis findet, war nicht wirklich originell oder für damalige Verhältnisse schockierend: Barth musste mit der geringstmöglichen Störung weiterarbeiten können.

5 Karl Barth und die Politik in Safenwil und in Deutschland

Pfr. Heilmann spricht den Wunsch aus (sehr freundlich übrigens), ich möchte mich, wegen der Schwierigkeiten der Stellung, der «Agitation für meine politische Überzeugung» enthalten. Das würde mir nicht schwerfallen, da ich auch hier nie agitiert habe. Oder steckt hinter diesem Wunsch irgendetwas Bedenkliches, Reaktionäres, mit der Rechtsströmung auf

¹² Brief an Eduard Thurneysen vom 2. 2. 1921. KBA 9270.293; Barth und Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel I*, 464–5.

Euren Universitäten Zusammenhängendes, eine Fußangel, der ich mich sofort entwinden müsste, ehe es zu spät ist!¹³

Als Barth im Herbst 1921 die Göttinger Professur antrat, gab es reichlich Anlass, Deutschland als «hohes, bewegtes Meer» zu beschreiben: die hasserfüllten Auseinandersetzungen um den Versailler Friedensvertrag, die dort diktierten Gebietsabtretungen und -besetzungen durch Truppen der Siegermächte, das Wüten rechtsradikaler Freikorps an den Grenzen und mit Billigung SPD-geführter Regierungen auch im Innern sowie der Kapp-Putsch und der erfolgreiche Generalstreik dagegen; Hyperinflation und NSDAP-Putschversuch sollten bald folgen. Alles Ereignisse, zu denen Barth sich in die politischen Verhältnisse Deutschlands hätte einarbeiten müssen, um als Schweizer *fundiert* und kritisch dazu öffentlich Stellung nehmen zu können.

Angesichts der Probleme, die es Barth nach zehn Jahren im Pfarramt bereitete, die eben übernommene Professur angemessen auszufüllen, und seiner vielfältigen weiteren neuen Verpflichtungen kann es nicht eigentlich verwundern, dass Barth in der deutschen Politik und Kirchenpolitik nicht gleich auch Furore machte. Man muss nicht, wie jüngst Paul S. Peterson,¹⁴ eine Metamorphose vom «radikal-sozialistischen» Safenwiler Barth zu einem mit deutschnationalen Ideen sympathisierenden «deutschen» Barth konstruieren, um erklären zu können, warum er gegenüber der deutschen Politik öffentlich lange zurückhaltend blieb. Ein *wirkliches* Historisieren, das die biographischen Faktoren umfasst und unvoreingenommen würdigt, wäre schon ein erster Schritt:

1) Barths Mentalität etwa war von der deutschen unterschieden und keineswegs nur deshalb mit der eines deutschen «Frontkämpfers» vergleichbar, weil er etwa im selben Alter war: Barth hatte gleich 1914 den Krieg konsequent abgelehnt und ihn nie als notwendig oder als irgendwie befreiendes Erlebnis empfunden. Er machte sein «Krisenerlebnis» am *Ausbruch* des Krieges fest – und nicht im «Erleben» desselben in den Schützengräben!¹⁵

13 Brief Barths an Martin Rade vom 31.1.1921. KBA 9221.5; *Karl Barth – Martin Rade. Ein Briefwechsel*, mit einer Einleitung hrsg. von Christoph Schwöbel (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1981), 154. – Die Einrichtung der Professur ging auf die Initiative des Göttinger Pfarrers Johann Adam Heilmann (1860–1930) zurück; vgl. Matthias Freudenberg, «Die Errichtung der Professur für Reformierte Theologie an der Georg-August-Universität Göttingen», *Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Niedersächsische Kirchengeschichte* 94 (1996): 237–57; vgl. auch Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 113–14.

14 Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth. Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation 1905–1935*, BHTh 184 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

15 Peterson etwa schließt eindimensional von Barths Geburtsjahrgang auf dessen Zugehörigkeit zur «Front Generation» (Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth*, 65). Zwar bemerkt er schon, dass die Schweizer unter den Dialektischen Theologen «a different relationship to the experiences of

2) Barth wurde in der als selbstverständlich demokratisch empfundenen Schweiz politisch sozialisiert, also im Rahmen einer viel kleinteiligeren Partizipation, die in der Regel nicht bei der großen Politik begann, die eher nicht von oben nach unten, sondern umgekehrt dachte und motiviert war, in der ein Engagement im Rahmen der eigenen Verantwortlichkeit jedoch viel selbstverständlicher war als anderswo. «Die Demokratie» als solche war für den Schweizer Barth kein eigenes und schon gar kein kontroverses politisches Thema, und wenn am Rande doch einmal, dann hat er keinen Zweifel daran gelassen, dass er sie zwar nicht idealisiert, aber doch anderen politischen Systemen vorzieht – auch einer Diktatur des Proletariats!¹⁶

Dies beachtend ließe sich fragen, ob überhaupt ein wirklicher Widerspruch zwischen dem politischen Verhalten Barths in Safenwil und in Göttingen besteht, ob das unterschiedliche Ausleben der politischen Haltung nicht eher mit der veränderten Aufgabenstellung zu tun hatte. Lehrer seiner Studenten und wissenschaftlich arbeitender Theologe zu sein, war ja nicht einfach dasselbe wie das Amt des Pfarrers in Safenwil. Dort fühlte er sich verpflichtet, sich auch um die äußeren und die Bildungsbedürfnisse der ihm anvertrauten Gemeinde zu kümmern – weil es nötig war, und weil dies kaum jemand anderes tat. Dort engagierte er sich gewerkschaftlich und politisch in der Partei, die ihm am ehesten gegen die auch in seiner Gemeinde herrschenden Ungerechtigkeiten vorzugehen versprach – weil es nötig war und weil es aus seiner Position heraus wirksam zu sein versprach.

Im angeführten Zitat unterscheidet Barth selbst sein politisches Engagement in Safenwil, das offensichtlich bekannt war, von der «Agitation» für eine politi-

WWI» hatten, jedoch: «they were intertwined with the intellectual framework of German Protestantism in the modern German Empire, the dominant central- and northern-European cultural and political force for all German speaking Protestants» (65). – Dieser Kunstgriff, mit dem man, ist die geographische, zeitliche und mentale Entfernung des Deutenden nur groß genug, Schweizer einfach zu «Intellekt-Deutschen» machen kann, überzeugt weder generell noch im konkreten Beispiel. Dass Peterson mit diesem Trick Barth der deutschen «Frontkämpfergeneration» zugehellen möchte, die eine wichtige Trägergruppe nationalsozialistischen Gedankenguts war, ist im Duktus seines Buches ebenso durchsichtig wie insgesamt absurd: Es müsste ja, aus welcher Entfernung immer, auffallen, dass Barth eben das fehlte, was dieser Generation Anlass zu Traumatisierung, Mystifizierung und Radikalisierung zugleich war: das «Fronterlebnis».

16 Vgl. etwa Karl Barth, «Demokratie oder Diktatur?» [1919], in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 501–2; zu früheren Stellungnahmen vgl. Peter Zocher, «Karl Barth und die Schweiz», in *Karl Barth als Lehrer der Versöhnung (1950–1968). Vertiefung – Öffnung – Hoffnung. Beiträge zum Internationalen Symposium vom 1. bis 4. Mai 2014 in der Johannes a Lasco Bibliothek Emden*, hg. Michael Beintker, Georg Plasger und Michael Trowitzsch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2016), 211–237, bes. 213–14.

sche Überzeugung, und es gibt keinen Grund, diese Aussage nicht ernst zu nehmen. Dann aber wären die Unterschiede in der politischen Aktivität vielleicht einfach darauf zurückzuführen, dass der Schweizer Barth «seinen» Ort für ein *konkretes* politisches Engagement in Deutschland zunächst nicht gefunden hat. Ohne einen solchen Ort aber schien ihm die Gefahr zu groß, dass man seinem Engagement und dann auch seiner Theologie die «Verwechslung zwischen dem Reiche Gottes und irgend einer politischen Ideologie» vorwerfen könne, von der er sich doch gerade distanzieren wollte.¹⁷

Mir erscheinen bezüglich gerade dieser «politischen» Thematik zwei Aspekte besonders wichtig:

Zunächst sollten die Unterschiede zwischen der Schweiz und Deutschland und ihre Auswirkungen nicht vorschnell marginalisiert, sondern stärker beleuchtet werden; man verstellt sich den Blick für das Besondere, wenn man es sich ein bisschen einfacher machen möchte und daher pauschalisiert.

Sodann sollte man sich durch Barths bewusste Zuspitzungen oder auch Provokationen auch dann nicht vorschnell zu ihrer unkritischen Übernahme verleiten lassen, wenn dies der eigenen Intention dienlich sein könnte. Es stimmt schon: Barth sprach selbst von «sozialistischen Reden», die er in Safenwil gehalten habe. Aber wie «radikal» und in welchem Sinne «sozialistisch» waren sie eigentlich? Eine direkte Wahlagitation aus ihnen herauszulesen, fällt schwer, und wer nicht alles «Sozialistische» als solches und automatisch für radikal hält, muss in ihnen keine übergroße Radikalität entdecken.

Eine Arbeit, die Barths politische Sozialisation, seine Absichten und die Wirkung seines Tuns oder Lassens vor allem in seinen «deutschen» Jahren von 1921 bis 1935 wissenschaftlich seriös untersucht und historisch verortet, steht nach wie vor aus.¹⁸ Meine (vorläufige) These dazu lässt sich kurz so zusammenfassen: Barth

17 So Barth selbst in einem Brief an Pierre Maury vom 12.10.1938. KBA 9238.152; auszugsweise abgedruckt in Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1935–1942*, hg. Diether Koch, Gesamtausgabe V (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), 124–25; französische Edition: Karl Barth – Pierre Maury, *Nous qui pouvons encore parler... Correspondance 1928–1956*, introduction, notes et traduction de Bernard Reymond (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1985), 133–38, in dem er dann begründete, warum sich seine Einstellung nun – sein Brief an Josef L. Hromádka war eben bekannt geworden – gewandelt habe: «Vielleicht war dieser Puritanismus damals nötig oder doch entschuldbar. Heute geht das so nicht mehr. Heute ist der totale Staat nicht als Idee, sondern als praktische Macht auf dem Plane, und wie man zu dieser Sache – laut oder leise – etwas Anderes als eben Nein sagen können soll, das kann ich nicht einsehen».

18 Auch die in Tübingen zur Habilitation angenommene und renommiert publizierte Monographie Paul S. Petersons, *The Early Karl Barth*, schließt diese Lücke nicht: Peterson benutzt und zitiert die Quellen zu häufig in einer methodisch unzureichenden und fragwürdigen Art und Weise, er interpretiert die so gewonnenen Ergebnisse an vielen Stellen mit einem verengten und

war in Safenwil bei weitem nicht so «radikal sozialistisch», wie manche es gern (gehabt) hätten. Und auch in Barths «deutschen» Jahren war seine eher linksorientierte politische Haltung von Beginn an kein Geheimnis, sondern bei seinen Kollegen, seinen Studenten und in der Öffentlichkeit wohlbekannt; er war – bei allem vorhandenen Verständnis für die besondere deutsche Lage in den 1920er Jahren – rechten oder deutschnationalen Positionen gegenüber nie so indifferent, wie manche es (heute) glauben machen möchten.

voreingenommen Blick, seine Argumentationsweise weist mehrfach ein nur geringes Gespür für das historische Umfeld und die sich aus diesem ergebenden Erfordernisse, Möglichkeiten und Ausdrucksformen auf und er beweist ein zu gering ausgeprägtes Einfühlungsvermögen in die Denkweise und die Sprache Barths. – Der Verfasser hat sich im Rahmen seines Beitrags zur Berner Ringvorlesung «Theologie am Nullpunkt. Karl Barth und die Krise der Kirche» (Frühjahrssemester 2019) ausführlicher mit Petersons Monographie befasst; ein gleichnamiger Sammelband mit den Beiträgen dieser Ringvorlesung wird in der Reihe «reformiert!» im Theologischen Verlag Zürich erscheinen.



Abb. 1: Karl Barth in 1911



Abb. 2: Karl Barth in 1926



Abb. 3: Nelly and Karl Barth's wedding, March 26, 1913



Abb. 4: Karl Barth with his five children (from left: Matthias, Markus, Franziska, Hans-Jakob, Christoph), Münster (~1927)



Abb. 5: Nelly and Karl Barth on the “Bergli” (~1925)

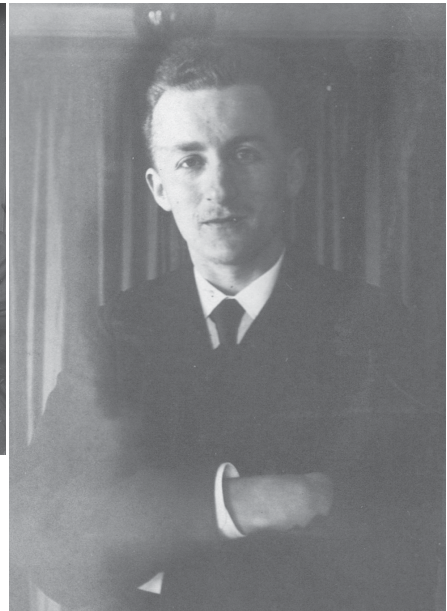


Abb. 6: Eduard Thurneysen in 1916

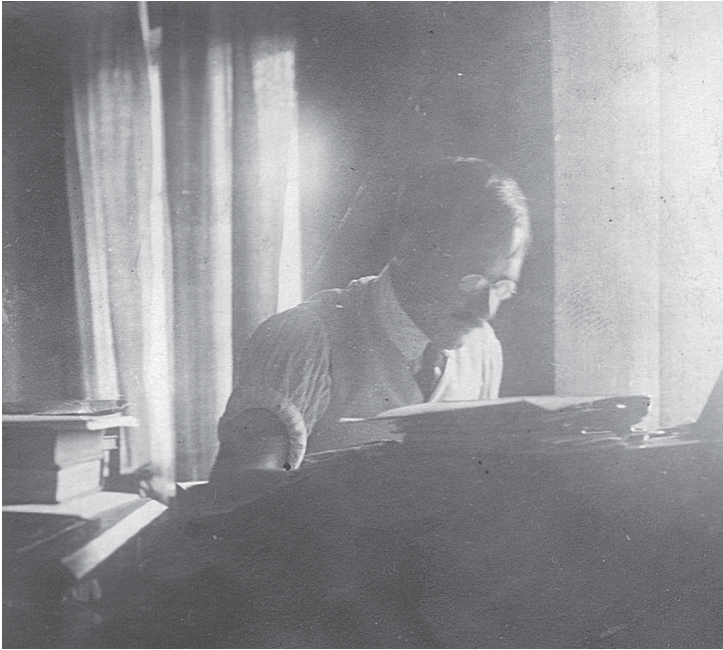


Abb. 7: Working on the *Römerbrief* (1920)



Abb. 8: Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen on the “Bergli” (1920)



Abb. 9: Excursion with Eduard Thurneysen (~1924)



Abb. 10: Karl Barth's first home in Germany: Göttingen, Nikolausberger Weg 66

Christophe Chalamet

Karl Barth and the Quest for a New World

“Life remains healthy only in *activity*, only in *movement*.”

Hermann Kutter¹

Abstract: Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* was written during the First World War. The first edition was completed in 1918. A closer look at this context, at certain influences on his thinking (especially Hermann Kutter, and via Kutter the two Blumhardt), at one of the central aims of the commentary, i.e. his critical dialogue with modern historical and critical exegesis, can help us better understand some of the key insights found in the first edition of his commentary on the epistle to the Romans. Several aspects are discussed: his understanding of eschatology, of idealism and realism, and the common critique of Barth’s supposed quietism.

1 Introduction

The present volume commemorates the publication of Karl Barth’s commentary on Paul’s epistle to the Romans, roughly 100 years ago, in 1919 (or late 1918). The impact of Barth’s commentary on Protestant theology, right from its publication as well as in its second edition (1922), is well attested. It is the second edition which had such a broad and lasting echo, whereas the first edition soon fell more or less into oblivion. It was (and still is) the second edition that is read mostly by scholars and specialists (unlike the second edition, the first one was, as far as I know, never translated into any language). But it is on the basis of the first edition that Barth, in January of 1921, was offered an academic position at the University of Göttingen. In what follows, I attempt to shed light on certain aspects related to the historical context of the book, focusing on the first edition. This is indispensable if one wishes to understand the message of the book and some of the reasons for its lasting influence.

¹ “Nur in der *Tätigkeit*, nur in der *Bewegung* bleibt das Leben gesund.” Hermann Kutter, *Gerechtigkeit (Römerbrief Kap. I-VIII): Ein altes Wort an die moderne Christenheit* (Berlin: Hermann Walther Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1905), 163.

2 A Call to a Renewed Attention to Scripture

Why did this book make such an impression on Protestant theology? There are several possible answers to this question. This book was, and still is, an instance of a very different way of approaching and practicing the study of Scripture within academic theology than was common at the turn of the 20th century. The *Römerbrief* commended an interpretation of the Bible which demarcates itself quite abruptly from modern Protestant exegesis. The point was not to reject the historical-critical method in any way, but rather to complement it with a theological, content-based study of the text. Barth was of course well aware of what he was doing: he was searching for a new way of interpreting the Bible: “If our ears become open once again to the *subject matter* which guided Paul, then what he articulated will also be understood again, as was obviously the case in the first century.”²

Barth was not alone in his attempt at focusing scriptural interpretation once again on what the text itself seeks to say, rather than on the context in which the text was produced, or on the author who wrote it and his worldview. He had by his side a close friend, who was searching with him for new paths for Protestant (and Christian) theology: Eduard Thurneysen, who was a pastor in Leutwil, not far from Barth’s parish of Safenwil (canton Aargau, Switzerland). Together, these two men were convinced they had to “start from scratch.” Theology as they knew it since their university days was now completely delegitimized, in their eyes at least. The beginning of the First World War was a watershed moment for them, when they realized that their most respected teachers (major theological figures such as Adolf von Harnack and Wilhelm Herrmann), at the beginning of the war, let their patriotism and nationalism take over their theological conscience. This radical delegitimizing of theology in the two young pastors’ eyes, in the fall and winter of 1914, required a no less radical reshaping of theology, from the ground up.

² “Wenn die Ohren einmal wieder offen sein werden für die Sache, die Paulus führte, dann wird auch seine Sprache verstanden werden, wie es offenbar im ersten Jahrhundert der Fall gewesen ist.” Karl Barth, “Vorwort Ia,” *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 584. Barth wrote several versions (five in total) of the preface to the commentary. They are included at the end of the critical edition of the first edition of the *Römerbrief (Der Römerbrief 1919, 581–602)*. For an analysis of these texts, see Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

3 Reading the Apostle Paul Afresh

“A new learning of the theological ABC”³: this is how Karl Barth, toward the end of his life, described his aim as he began to delve into the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans, one day in July 1916 under an apple tree in the garden of the parish manse in Safenwil. Barth had hesitated between Kant (a candidate that made sense since a key aim was to clarify the ground rules of theological discourse) and the Bible, in the end it was the latter that became the focus of his study. “I read and read, I wrote and wrote.”⁴ A first version of the text, in the form of 20 notebooks, for a total of 936 handwritten pages, was completed on June 4, 1918.⁵ The *Römerbrief* is thus a book that was entirely written during the war. It was published in 1918, around Christmas, but the date chosen for the title page was “1919.” The publisher wanted to sell a “fresh” product...

During the months of intense study and writing that preceded the publication, Barth would read long excerpts from his manuscripts to his wife Nelly and to young aides who lived in the manse. On a particular day of January 1918, this lasted two hours, without interruptions.⁶

Quite regularly, a full-blown “wrestling game” was taking place between the 34-year-old pastor and the apostle Paul’s epistle. In the Preface to the first edition, Barth wrote of the “joy of discovery” he experienced while writing the book (the somewhat romantic mention of his *Entdeckerfreude* was singled out by some reviewers, especially by the respected New Testament scholar Adolf Jülicher, right at the beginning of his sharply critical review), but whatever discoveries he made in those months did not come naturally or easily.⁷

3 “Faktisch-praktisch drängte sich uns dann bekanntlich etwas viel Naheliegenderes auf: nämlich der Versuch, bei einem erneuten Erlernen des theologischen ABC noch einmal und besinnlicher als zuvor mit der Lektüre und Auslegung der Schriften des Alten und Neuen Testaments einzusetzen.” *Schleiermacher-Auswahl. Mit einem Nachwort von Karl Barth*, ed. Heinz Bolli (München, Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968), 294.

4 *Schleiermacher-Auswahl*, 295.

5 See Hermann Schmidt’s introduction in Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, xiii.

6 “Nun ist Römer 8 fertig, wieder 100 Seiten, ich fürchte, es wird ein sehr dickes Buch, der arme Rudi [Pestalozzi] mit seiner Gutsprache! Ich las es gestern Nelly und unsern beiden Hilfen vor, starke zwei Stunden lang, und sie standen alle erstaunt am Ufer der Fluten.” Letter from January 23, 1918, in Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band I (1913–1921)*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe V.3 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 260.

7 “Man wird es ihm ansprechen, dass es mit Entdeckerfreude geschrieben ist. Die kräftige Stimme des Paulus war mir neu, und es ist mir, sie müsste auch manchen Andern neu sein. Aber das da noch Vieles ungehört und unentdeckt ist, das ist mir am Ende dieser Arbeit ganz klar.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 4. For Jülicher’s critique, see his article “Ein moderner Paulus-Ausleger,”

In February 1918, Barth wrote to Thurneysen: “I often think of my Römerbrief as a genuine *tower of Babel*. Perhaps at the end it would be better to make a bonfire, rather than publish it. Does the good Lord actually want such a text? It is merely, once again, a new theology.”⁸ This last comment is interesting. It reveals that Barth’s aim, with his commentary, was not to enter the fray with yet another theology, but rather to let God’s word resonate. Thurneysen’s reply to Barth on the possible project of a bonfire was clear: “You must not burn the *Römerbrief*; perhaps add somewhere in the preface a strong short statement which forbids people to read it merely ‘theologically.’ But your text in fact already does that.”⁹

Did Barth really hope to enunciate a sort of prophetic word, rather than a theological word? The question cannot be settled so quickly, for Barth was too careful in distinguishing any human word or act from God’s word or act: he simply could not envision his own, human word as belonging on the side of God’s word.¹⁰ But at the same time he had little desire to merely add another stone to the edifice of modern theological scholarship. In his commentary, turning to the ninth chapter of the epistle, he wrote: “If all that precedes were a theory, a dogma, or a program, then all the concerns, questions, and tasks which remain would not require our earnest attention.”¹¹ It is in this sense, namely the refusal of “theory,” “dogma,” or any “program,” that we may more adequately interpret the pejorative comment to Thurneysen concerning yet another “theology,” and thus begin to understand Barth’s real aim. He hoped to “point” in the direction of God’s “new world,” knowing that when this new world arises or comes near, it

Die Christliche Welt 34 (1920), col. 453–54 (453–57 and 466–69), reprinted in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*, vol. 1, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966): 87–98, 87.

⁸ “Mein Römerbrief kommt mir oft vor wie ein rechter *Turm zu Babel*. Vielleicht wäre es besser, ihn zum Schluss feierlich zu verbrennen, als drucken zu lassen. Ob der liebe Gott dieses Geschreibe eigentlich will? Es ist ja doch nur wieder eine neue Theologie.” Letter from February 11, 1918, in Barth–Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel 1913–1921*, 265.

⁹ “Den Römerbrief darfst du unter keinen Umständen verbrennen, du gibst ihm vielleicht im Vorwort ein kräftiges Sprüchlein mit, das verhindert, dass man ihn nur ‘theologisch’ verstehe. Aber er sorgt schon selber dafür.” Letter to Barth from February 12, 1918, in Barth–Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel 1913–1921*, 266.

¹⁰ This is how Barth put it in 1927, in the Preface to this *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*: “I was and am an ordinary theologian, I am not a prophet equipped with God’s word; what I have is at best a ‘doctrine of the Word of God’ [...]” Preface, in Karl Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. Erster Band: Die Lehre vom Worte Gottes. Prolegomena zur christlichen Dogmatik* (1927), ed. Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe II.14 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), 8.

¹¹ “Wäre das Bisherige als Theorie, Dogma oder Programm gemeint, so dürften nun alle weiteren Sorgen, Fragen und Aufgaben gar nicht mehr ernstlich in Betracht gezogen werden.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 356.

is not because human beings have produced something, but rather because this new world itself has begun to manifest itself.

Let us now turn to “prospective” aspects in relation to Barth’s commentary. He hoped not to imprison Paul and his epistle within the bounds of the first century, and we should follow suit as we examine Barth and his book.

4 The “New World” – Hermann Kutter’s Influence on Karl Barth

The theme of the “new world” is central in the first edition of Barth’s commentary. The expression “die neue Welt,” as opposed to “die alte Welt,” is a recurring one throughout the book. This expression may help us uncover the heart of what Barth wished to convey. It designates a central aspect, namely God’s action toward humanity “which misses the goods of God”: humanity which desires these goods, which searches for them in many different, albeit misguided, directions. Barth summarizes the “good news” of the gospel by speaking of the “integration in a new world, where death will be no more.”¹² This “new world” has everything to do with “God’s new acts” (*neue Taten Gottes*).¹³

Hermann Kutter (1863–1931), the well-known Swiss socialist pastor and theologian, whose influence on Barth is particularly obvious throughout the first edition of the *Römerbrief*, and whom Barth explicitly praised in his 1927 *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*,¹⁴ already spoke of the “new world” in his

12 “Wie wird Gott antworten? Zweierlei hat er zu vergeben: Ewiges Leben, Eingliederung in eine neue Welt, in der der Tod nicht mehr sein wird [...]” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 50.

13 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 50.

14 Leonhard Ragaz summarized the first edition of Barth’s *Römerbrief* as follows: “Von Kutter inspiriert, Blumhardt missbrauchend.” (“Inspired by Kutter, misusing Blumhardt.”). See *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 126, n. 20. Kutter wrote this in his own commentary of Paul’s epistle, chap. 1–8: “Jede Frömmigkeit, die nicht von Gott ausgeht, ist falsch.” Kutter, *Gerechtigkeit*, 175. For Barth’s praise of Kutter, see e.g. Barth, *Die christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, 4–5 and 151. He mentions Kutter directly in relation with the two Blumhardt (father and son) and Luther as belonging to the eminent theologians who have produced a theology which, even if it is “irregular,” is much more significant and serious than many “regular” theologies “which perhaps know really a lot less about the theme” of theology than these four thinkers: “Wird sie in strenger Sachlichkeit getrieben – und dazu ist ‘Methode’ nicht durchaus nötig –, dann kann sie sehr wohl zu Teilerfolgen führen, die bedeutsamer und ernsthafter sind als die Leistungen von Dutzenden allzu methodischer Methodiker, die von der Sache vielleicht wirklich weniger wissen als solche Freischärler. Ich denke dabei z. B. an die ‘Theologie’ der beiden *Blumhardt* oder *Hermann Kutters*. Der grosse irreguläre Dogmatiker ist kein anderer als *Luther!*” (151).

own commentary on Romans.¹⁵ This expression was central as Kutter, in 1927, reminisced upon his crucial discovery, in September 1889 thanks to Christoph Blumhardt (1842–1919), of the difference between a piety centered upon “my” experience of God, on the one hand, and faith in which God matters for God’s sake. Kutter wrote: “Christ lives *in me*: this is the old world. *Christ* lives in me: that is the new one. Stated in such a simple way, this became, in a flash of recognition, [...] a fundamental and basic distinction.”¹⁶ Kutter wrote these words in 1927, and so perhaps in the light of Barth’s commentary of Romans. Still, we find traces, in Kutter’s earlier works, which confirm that his comments, in 1927, were not merely inspired by his younger colleague and friend. In a sermon from 1906, Kutter spoke of the soul that learns to serve the living God, instead of making use of the gospel for itself, adding: “This no longer means: Jesus for us, but we for Jesus.”¹⁷ A leading figure, alongside Leonhard Ragaz (1868–1945), in the German-speaking “social Christian” movement in Switzerland (the equivalent in Europe to the ‘social Gospel’ in the United States), Kutter was known for emphasizing human action in service of the gospel. This emphasis was rooted in God’s own act toward the world.

If this “new world” actually concerns God’s “acts,” then this “new world” has to do with a history. Not just “our” history, with its ups and downs, and with such catastrophic downs as the First World War, but rather God’s history, i. e. a history which does not “float” above our history, as if it were simply foreign

15 “Er [der Apostel] hat die neue Welt im Glauben vorweggenommen, die ohne Schatten der Sünde hereinbrechen wird. [...] Dem Apostel wie allen, die mit ihm glauben, ist die Welt des Göttlichen eine *Wirklichkeit*, nicht bloss ein religiöses Objekt; das Leben, von dem er spricht, nicht ein frommes Wort, das die ebenso trügerischen wie wechselnden Gefühlsstimmungen der Religion im Munde führen, sondern gesunde, frische, treibende Kraft, aus der eine neue Welt emporwächst – wie im Frühling tausend Knospen sich zu Blüten und Blumen entfalten. Da ist alles real.” Kutter, *Gerechtigkeit*, 162. See Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 210–11, n. 11–12.

16 “[...] Christus lebt *in mir*, das war die alte Welt – *Christus* lebt in mir, das war die neue. In dieser einfachen Formulierung wurde mir in einem Blitz der Erkenntnis der [...] fundamentale und prinzipielle Unterschied klar.” Hermann Kutter, *Not und Gewissheit. Ein Briefwechsel* (Basel: Kober, 1927), 24–28, here 28. Quoted in Hans-Anton Drewes, “Das Unmittelbare bei Hermann Kutter. Eine Untersuchung im Hinblick auf die Theologie des jungen Karl Barth,” PhD thesis, University of Tübingen, 1978, 25–26 (on Barth’s gratitude toward Kutter, as expressed in 1917 and 1927, see 189–90). Hans-Anton Drewes’ dissertation remains the most important study on Kutter and Barth.

17 “Da lernt die Seele dem lebendigen Gotte dienstbar werden, nicht sich selbst sein Evangelium dienstbar machen. Da heisst es nicht mehr: Jesus für uns, sondern wir für Jesus.” Hermann Kutter, *Der Advent der Armen. Predigt gehalten im Neumünster zu Zürich* (Zürich: Verlag der Grütlbuchhandlung, 1906), 15.

to our history or relating to it as a “foreign body” – no! God’s act “interrupts” the flux of our history and conveys to it the true meaning of history.¹⁸

The breakthrough of the “new world” within our history manifests the presence of evil in the “old world.” The coming of the “new world” does not merely reveal a brand new reality: it also reveals something to the “old world” about itself. To put it differently: in revealing something new, it reveals what is old about the “old world.” The meaning of history which comes to light in the “new world” manifests the “non-sense” (*Unsinn*) of our history.¹⁹ These are some of the important implications of this “turning of the time” (*Wende der Zeit*) of which Barth speaks in the course of his commentary.²⁰ Barth writes of the “breakthrough of the real reality of God’s kingdom” as a way to express the radical newness of what God effects.²¹ The theme of the “coming of the Kingdom” indicates quite clearly a “movement from God’s part” (*göttliche Bewegung*).²² One could say that, from the beginning of his theological career until the end, Barth focused his attention on this “movement from God’s part” as a way to shed light on how this movement, in turn, sets the world, and human beings within it, in motion. As he writes in his commentary of Rom. 11:33–36: “God himself is not finished but in the freest, liveliest movement. God is the goodness that is new every morning (Lam. 3:23). God wishes to draw us into this movement.”²³

The influence of Hermann Kutter on Thurneysen and Barth should thus not be minimized. In return, Kutter, whom they (and other friends of his) called “Papa,” was following their development closely, and with increasing appreciation, to the point where, in the summer of 1925, despite a brief crisis three months earlier, he hoped one of the two would succeed him in Zurich as pastor

18 “Die Idee Gottes und des Guten schwebt nicht mehr als Fremdkörper über einer auch ihr fremdartigen Geschichte, sondern an einem Punkt der Geschichte ist das geschehen, was in der Idee, im Gesetz immer gemeint, geboten, geweissagt war. Damit ist die ‘Geschichte’ grundsätzlich, von Gott her, abgebrochen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 85.

19 “Der Unsinn der Geschichte wird uns erkennbar, weil jetzt ihr Sinn vorhanden ist. Das Gericht wird unausweichlich, weil es eine Gnade gibt.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 86.

20 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 89–90.

21 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 88 (“der Durchbruch der wirklichen Wirklichkeit seines kommenden Reiches”).

22 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 88.

23 “Er ist nicht fertig, sondern in freier, lebendigster Bewegung. Er ist die Güte, die aller Morgen neu ist [Klagel. 3,23]. In diese Bewegung will er uns hineinziehen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 459. This verse from the book of Lamentations was one of Barth’s most cherished Biblical passages.

of one of the main parishes, the Neumünster.²⁴ In May 1924, Thurneysen wrote to Barth to report what he had heard from Kutter himself, namely that the two young theologians were “increasingly the consolation and hope of his [Kutter’s] old age.”²⁵ As Kutter was dying, in March 1931, Barth reflected upon his complex relationship to him and wondered how, if someone asked him, he would talk truthfully about it. He regretted the fact that their last encounter, on the Bergli (the small chalet overlooking Lake Zurich where Barth spent around 30 summer vacations during his life), had been confrontational.²⁶

5 Idealism and Realism

In the first edition of his commentary, Barth wishes to show the consequences, for philosophy and especially for theology, of the movement which is *God’s* movement. Among these consequences, there is what appears to be a reconciliation of idealism and realism through a transcending of the two. Barth uses the terms “idealism” and “realism” repeatedly in the first edition. This is a topic which would be of continuing interest to Barth beyond the immediate post-war years, as can be seen from subsequent writings such as “The Word of God

24 See the editorial note in Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band II (1921–1930)*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe V.4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1974), 248, n. 4, as well as 337–47 (letter from E. Thurneysen to Karl Barth from June 11, 1925 and subsequent letters). On the crisis in March of 1925, during which Kutter expressed his disappointment at seeing Barth and Thurneysen focusing on the *concept* of God, instead of focusing on God, see 311–18 (this critique is somewhat similar to Barth’s comments, presented above, on producing a “new theology”...).

25 “Im Übrigen werden wir – hört! – zusehends mehr und mehr Trost und Hoffnung seines Alters. Und wir müssen und dürfen uns das wohl gefallen lassen, trotz allen Vorbehalt, die wir da wohl zu machen haben.” Letter from Eduard Thurneysen to Karl Barth, May 8, 1924, in Barth–Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel 1921–1930*, 247–48.

26 “Wie schwierig wäre ich dran, wenn ich jetzt eine wirklich wahrheitsgetreue Schilderung der Geschichte meiner Beziehungen zu diesem seltenen und auch ganz seltsamen Mann geben sollte. [...] Dass in dem vielfachen Wechsel meiner Begegnungen mit ihm nun gerade eine solche, in der die wohl gegenseitige Abstossung überwog, die letzte gewesen sein soll, hat etwas Schmerzliches für mich, aber das hat nun vielleicht sein müssen.” Letter from Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen from March 8, 1931, in Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band 3 (1930–1935)*, ed. Caren Algner, Gesamtausgabe V.34 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2000), 117–18. Hermann Kutter died on March 22, 1931.

as the Task of Theology” (1922) and even more so in “Fate and Idea” (*Schicksal und Idee*) from 1929.²⁷ In the first edition of *Romans*, Barth wrote:

The organic unity of God, the world and humanity, had been lost, it is now reinstated, it renders superfluous all the artful combinations by philosophers and theologians. The ditch between willing and doing [7,18], the ideal and life, is filled, the two oscillate in the single divine movement itself. The real (*das Reale*), i.e. ‘action such as the law envisions it,’ only occurs from God (*von Gott aus*), and nevertheless not outside of us, but within us. The *final* words of Platonism and the Old Testament are validated. What occurs is that ‘goodness and faithfulness meet, justice and peace embrace, faithfulness springs up from the ground, and justice looks down from the sky’ (Psalm 85:11–12).²⁸

Barth juxtaposes “willing” and “doing,” “the ideal” and “life.” These two pairs express the polarity of idealism and realism. “Willing” has to do with idealism, with what the Law demands, whereas “doing” is related to realism, to life as we know it.

What does Barth mean by “idealism”? In relation with this term, and with “the entire idealist world of thought” (*die ganze Gedankenwelt des Idealismus*), one finds the names of Moses, Plato, but also Jesus, the fathers of the German world of “bourgeoisie,” and also the fathers of socialism.²⁹ What all these different figures have in common is their *protest*, their *critique*, on behalf of what is not, against what is (but ought not be). Idealism is a struggle against all of the things that should not exist in our world, on behalf of what should exist, i.e. all of humanity’s highest ideals. It is mainly programmatic; it is unable to fulfil what it promises or envisions. Only at one point in human history, due

27 Karl Barth, “The Word of God as the Task of Theology (1922),” in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 174–98; “Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie (1929),” in Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten (1925–1930)*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe III.24 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1994), 344–92; “Fate and Idea in Theology,” in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. H. Martin Rumscheidt (Eugene: Pickwick, 1986), 25–61. A French translation of this text, prepared by Elio Jaillet, will soon be published (Ad solem, Geneva).

28 “Die verlorengegangene organische Einheit von Gott, Welt und Mensch tritt wieder in Kraft und macht alle Kombinationskünste der Philosophen und Theologen überflüssig. Die Kluft zwischen Wollen und Vollbringen [7,18], Ideal und Leben schließt sich, und beide werden zu Schwingungen der einen und selben göttlichen Bewegung. Das Reale, ‘das vom Gesetz gemeinte Handeln’, geschieht nun von Gott aus und doch nicht außer uns, sondern in uns. Die *letzten* Worte des Platonismus und des Alten Testaments kommen zu ihrem Recht. Es geschieht nun, ‘daß Güte und Treue einander begegnen, Gerechtigkeit und Friede sich küssen, dass Treue auf der Erde wächst und Gerechtigkeit vom Himmel schaut’ (Ps. 85,11–12).” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 88. On the “inner movement in God” (“eine innere Bewegung in Gott”), see 161.

29 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 90.

to God's decisive intervention in Jesus-Christ, has the idealist vision become real.³⁰

The real, on the other hand, is identified by Barth with God: God is the "truly real," one could say.³¹ God's act grounds the realist theological outlook. Here it is not the "not yet" that dominates; it is the "already Now," the "but (already) Now!" (*das 'Jetzt aber!'*, as Barth puts it) that comes to expression.³² Barth even asserts, against idealism's predilection for the apophatic dimension, that God's "depths" should not be interpreted in the sense of an unfathomable reality, "for God is indeed fathomable and intelligible to those who search for him."³³

There is therefore a dimension of struggle between God and the world. A disorder has occurred. But at the same time this struggle has lost its meaning, for God no longer enters in a fight against the world: God declares the world as "God's" world; God declares his solidarity with it. God's anger is over.³⁴

6 True Revolution

A revolution has taken place: not a revolution like the ones human beings were provoking or attempting in various European countries at the time, for instance in October 1917 in Russia or, on a very different scale, through the Zurich riots of November 17, 1917, which were a small replica of the events in Russia (three casualties among the protesters; one policeman dead), or the general strike which shook Switzerland in November 1918 as people were celebrating the end of the war, and as Barth's commentary was being printed.

Barth speaks of a different revolution than those inner-worldly and man-made historical events that upend human societies: he has in mind the revolution that God triggers, both "objectively" (*objektiv*) and "universally" (*univers-*

30 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 78 and 85.

31 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 37.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 91.

33 "Die 'Tiefe' Gottes ist *nicht* seine 'Unerforschlichkeit', denn Gott ist erforschlich und erkennbar denen, die ihn suchen [...]." Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 459. Barth goes on to speak of the immense, unfathomable and inexhaustible nature ("Unergründlichkeit, Unermeßlichkeit, Uerschöpflichkeit") of the wisdom and knowledge that God confers, unceasingly ("von Stunde zu Stunde"), to those who search for God (460).

34 Barth makes this crystal-clear: "Gott führt nun gerade nicht mehr Krieg gegen die Welt, sondern erklärt sie als *seine* Welt, erklärt sich mit ihr solidarisch." Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 90.

sal).³⁵ The “new world” comes from God, from God’s act. But this act is directed toward the world, transforming and recreating it. The implications of this revolution for humanity and the world are immense. Barth expresses one consequence of this divine “revolution” as follows: “I no longer am in a relation of a ‘fall’ from God, but in a relation of return towards God.”³⁶ It is because human beings, in their hybris, tried to attain God that they fell from God. The advent of the “new world,” on the other hand, entirely depends on God’s movement: the movement through which God reaches “down” to renew the world.³⁷

There is a chapter in Barth’s commentary in which the topic of the “old” and “new world” is particularly important: Romans 8. In the first edition of his commentary, Barth titles this entire chapter: “The Spirit” (*Der Geist*). He kept this title for the second edition, but the three subsections now had a different title.³⁸ The fact that developments on the theme of the “new world” are found in comments on this particular chapter of the apostle Paul’s epistle is in itself an indication that the reality of the “new world” is intimately related to the action of the Spirit of God in the world. The Spirit is the reality which renews everything, which is never content with the past or with the present state of the world: the Spirit comes to renew the world. Barth writes: “The Spirit is not romantic-conservative. The Spirit does not take relations as they are. The Spirit is not interested in maintaining what pertains until now, what is there; the Spirit is interested in the transformation and regeneration of reality.”³⁹ Quite clearly, the cosmic tones of the apostle have found their way in Barth’s interpretation.

35 See for example: “Geist kann in der Gegenwart nichts Anderes sein als Revolution, auch die Revolution dessen, was sich in der Gegenwart Revolution nennt!” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 316.

36 “Ich stehe nicht mehr im Abfall von Gott, sondern in der Rückkehr zu ihm.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 293.

37 “Ein empörerischer Griff des Menschen nach den Gerechtsamen Gottes eröffnete den alten Äon, ein verzeihendes Herniedersteigen Gottes mitten hinein in die dadurch geschaffenen Daseinsbedingungen des Menschen eröffnet den neuen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 302.

38 In 1918, this chapter was structured alongside the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future (*Das Vergangene/Das Gegenwärtige/Das Zukünftige*). In the second edition, the three sections are titled: “The Decision/Truth/Love” (*Die Entscheidung/Die Wahrheit/Die Liebe*). On Barth’s interpretation of Rom 8 in the *Römerbrief*, see Sarah Stewart-Kroeker’s contribution to the present volume.

39 “Der Geist ist nie romantisch-konservativ. Der Geist nimmt die Verhältnisse nicht, wie sie sind. Der Geist hat nicht Interesse an der Erhaltung des Bisherigen, des Bestehenden, sondern an seiner Verwandlung und Neugeburt.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 316.

7 Eschatology

Barth's commentary, as a whole, is turned toward God's future, toward eschatology conceived in a particular way. The Spirit is the "force of God" (*Kraft Gottes*) which comes not in order to destroy, but to renew everything.⁴⁰ Barth quotes a striking sentence from Calvin's commentary on Romans: "no element, no part of the world" is excluded from the hope of the resurrection.⁴¹

Even though many pages, in the first edition of his commentary, contain strongly positive accents, for instance on the "return to immediacy" (*Unmittelbarkeit*) with God – Barth severely toned down these accents in the second edition –, we should not omit to mention the various expressions, in the first edition, of what theologians sometimes call the "eschatological reservation," or the "not yet."

The presence of the "new world" is a "seed" (*Keim*), an inconspicuous element in our "old world."⁴² The "new world" is in fact only an "enclave" in the "old world," as the "old world" is in the process of destroying itself and collapsing.⁴³ The image of the "seed" or "germ" is a way to recall what still needs to come, what still needs to become apparent. The struggle is not over, victory is not yet fully there, even if the "new world" has already begun to emerge and to come – decisively so in the event of Easter. But what has already begun to emerge does not allow us to become satisfied with what is already being given: quite the opposite! It kindles in us the urge to move forward, in the direction of what is still coming toward us. "No surprise, therefore, that a deep unrest

⁴⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 330.

⁴¹ "[...] nullum esse elementum nullamve mundi partem, quae non veluti praesentis miseriae agnitione tacta in spem resurrectionis intenta sit." Jean Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos, Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia (Calvini opera)*, vol. 49, *Corpus reformatorum*, vol. 77 (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1892), 152 (on Rom 8:19). Quoted in Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 327–28.

⁴² The term "inconspicuous" might actually be a good candidate for translating the German word, which Barth abundantly uses in the second edition, "unanschaulich."

⁴³ "Auf Erden wie im Himmel hat Gottes Werk zu geschehen begonnen. Mitten in der Fleischeswelt ist eine Enklave der Gotteswelt entstanden, deren Bezirk sich zunehmend vergrößert. [...] Diese Wendung ist unwiderruflich und in ihren Folgen unaufhaltsam und unübersehbar, so gewiss das Leben der nahe herbeigekommenen Gotteswelt dem eigenmächtigen Leben der alten Fleischeswelt innerlich überlegen ist." Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 303 (see also: "die freie Enklave der Gerechtigkeit Gottes," 316).

is present within us,” Barth writes, quoting Calvin.⁴⁴ The very source of hope is also the source of this “deep unrest” of which the apostle Paul speaks in Romans 8. It is precisely because there is hope that there is unrest, “sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).⁴⁵

8 Agency – Divine and Human

God’s action in Christ and through the Spirit renews the world in order to render it conform to what God envisions. This action, in turn, triggers human acts. Barth speaks of a “labor” and a “struggle with the world which is not saved”: we do not choose this labor and this struggle. Rather, we find ourselves placed by God in this situation.⁴⁶

Even as Barth mentions God’s presence “within” human beings, the young pastor opposes any lasting focus on human interiority: communion with God is never limited to human interiority, but rather strives for “corporeity,” it reaches in the direction of what he calls “the materiality of creation as a whole.”⁴⁷

Barth typically walks on a ridge in his theological path: human action must be thematized, for the communion with God cannot be limited to interiority, it always tends toward external, corporeal expression. But can human action help the “seed” of the “new world” grow? This was a basic dogma of most social-gospelers in Barth’s time (and also after him): we are called to help build the kingdom, its coming into the world, or at least we are urged to “prepare its ways”... Barth urged his readers to be very cautious on this point, and in this way departed from many leaders of social Christianity of his day, especially Leonhard Ragaz, who in return accused Barth of “quietism,” i.e. of recommending passivity and disengagement. But is it true that “Barth highlights the power

44 “Kein Wunder also, dass wir von tiefer Beunruhigung umgetrieben sind.” *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 333. “Nam quia nondum plenitudine donati sumus, non mirum est inquietudine nos moveri.” Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, 154.

45 “Aber im Gegenteil: gerade der Grund unserer Seligkeit ist ja der Grund unseres Seufzens!” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 335.

46 “Er stellt uns ja an die Arbeit und in den Kampf mit einer unerlösten Welt, deren jetzt noch gottfremde Elemente seiner Herrschaft entgegenstehen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 334.

47 “Es gibt keine in der Innerlichkeit stehenbleibende Gemeinschaft mit Gott. Das wäre die Versumpfung des Geistes. Das wäre der alte individualistische Greuel des Pietismus, dessen Holzwegen und Sackgassen wir im Christus entronnen sind. Die wirkliche Sohnschaft Gottes, die wir noch nicht haben, sondern die wir erwarten, ist die ‘Erlösung unseres Leibes’, der Sieg Gottes in der *Leiblichkeit* der gesamten Schöpfung, von der unsere eigene ja nur Partikel und Inbegriff ist.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 334–35.

of God's action at the expense of human activity, thus replacing religious activism with quietism"?⁴⁸ There is a long debate concerning Barth's ethics and its supposed quietism, which cannot be addressed here, but it seems to me that the theme of the "new world" as Barth presents it in the first edition of the *Römerbrief* enables him to steer clear of a certain caricature of his ethics, which reduces it to a renouncement to act and to be personally (or communally) involved within the world. Commenting on Rom 12:2 ("Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect"), Barth states that "the decisive process through which one confronts, step by step, the old, external world, with the new, inner world, this can occur only in relation with a fundamental new orientation through the Spirit of God, who must become for you the object of a continuing and penetrating quest, questioning and search."⁴⁹

To embark always anew on a quest, to question and to continually search for the Spirit of God: does any of this have anything to do with quietism and passivity? Not quite! It is true that Barth refuses any direct identification between any political, ecclesial, or ethical commitment and a human contribution to the coming of God's kingdom. It is also true that, in tune with 2 P 3:12 and key aspects of the two Blumhardt (Johann Christoph Blumhardt and his son Christoph Blumhardt) and Hermann Kutter, Barth speaks of "waiting" as a key dimension of Christian ethics.⁵⁰ All this is true. But does this mean he was promoting an attitude of disengagement? Surely, Barth places a strong emphasis on God's act – but does that mean he suppresses human agency? There is a difference between the refusal to give directives, as so many do – in an attempt to identify certain human acts in direct relation with the "new world," as if such acts were bound to go in the direction of this "new world" – and the refusal to commit in any way, or the (in fact impossible) refusal to "act" in any way in the world. The revelation that occurs in Christ implies "an entry, marked by compas-

48 "Barth highlights the power of God's action at the expense of human activity, thus replacing religious activism with quietism." Alexander Massmann, *Citizenship in Heaven and on Earth: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 11.

49 "Der entscheidende Vorgang, durch den ihr Schritt für Schritt der alten, äusseren Welt die neue, innere entgegenstellt, kann sich nicht anders vollziehen als im Zusammenhang mit einer grundsätzlichen Neu-Orientierung durch den Geist Gottes, die euch zum Gegenstand eines anhaltenden und eindringenden Suchens, Fragens und Forschens werden muss." Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 469.

50 See his sermon from April 29, 1917, titled "Wartet und eilet zu der Zukunft des Tages Gottes!," in Karl Barth, *Predigten 1917*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe I.32 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1999), 155–62. See also Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 338–39 and 506–7.

sion, collaboration, and hope, with others in the misery of this contemporary world,” it calls for “work and struggle in every place and at every moment,” Barth writes in his commentary.⁵¹ How can such a stance be misunderstood as “quietist”?

Ethics does not escape the “continuing and penetrating quest” of which Barth speaks in the quote above – and in this way ethics might avoid turning into an ideology with a thin Christian veneer, free of any critical reflection and of any theological critique. A careful reading of the first edition of Barth’s commentary should take into account what he writes about a “representing,” a *vertreten* of the “new world” by those who orient themselves, always anew, toward God.⁵² Commenting on Rom 12:2, Barth writes: “It is only through the logic of God that the spirit of the present aeon will be overcome, that we will become capable not only of braving the ‘scheme’ of the present aeon, but to oppose it using a different, new, and victorious ‘scheme.’”⁵³ Relying on the apostle Paul’s terminology (see e.g. Rom 12:1), Barth speaks of the “offering” which is expected from us. The language of “offering” (*Darbringung*), of becoming “capable” of confronting the “old world” through the logic of the “new world,” all of this clearly indicates that a human action is part and parcel of the message of the apostle’s and the evangelical message (we would find similar results if we were to examine what Barth says about baptism in his commentary). And so we can consider with a measure of suspicion the accusations of “quietism” which have been, and still are, directed at Barth, whose life, including during his years in Aargau, confirms quite clearly that he had very little inclination toward “disengagement” from the world. At the beginning of his Tambach lecture, in September 1919, he stated: “Today we long for a promise precisely because our eyes have been opened wide to the problematic character of existence. [...] We

51 “Gotteserkenntnis ist kein Entrinnen in die sichere Höhe reiner Ideen, sondern ein mitleidendes und mitschaffendes und mithoffendes Eintreten auf die Not der jetzigen Welt. Die im Christus geschehene Offenbarung ist ja eben nicht die Mitteilung einer intellektuellen Klarheit, [...] sondern Kraft Gottes, die uns in *Bewegung* setzt, Schöpfung eines neuen Kosmos, [...] Arbeit und Kampf an jedem Punkt und für jede Stunde.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 356.

52 “Wohl aber habt ihr zu lernen, euch wieder an Gott zu orientieren, d. h. normal und zentral zu denken von Gott. [...] Das richtige *Denken* ist das Prinzip der Verwandlung, durch die ihr der alten Welt gegenüber etwas Neues werden und *vertreten* könnt, des eigenen Charakters, mit dem ihr als Gottes Leute seine Sache führen sollt.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 470.

53 “Durch die Logik Gottes allein wird der Geist dieses Äons überwunden, werden wir fähig, dem ‘Schema’ dieses Äons nicht nur zu trotzen, sondern ihm ein neues siegreich entgegenzustellen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 471.

want a *different* society.”⁵⁴ In the mid-1930’s, as he was teaching on the Apostles’ Creed and the confession of “eternal life,” he made it very clear that we should abstain from certain views of “eternal life” that disconnect it from our present existence: eternity does *not* mean

that this life of ours is annihilated and its place taken by some other life in some other world, even if it be an eternal world. [...] eternal life in the sense of Holy Scripture is this life that is ours now in this world that now is, this life, still, as it has always been, distinguished from the life of God, since it is created, but now, as a life that has become *new* in an earth that has become *new* under a heaven that has become *new* [...]. [...] it is eternal in its being lived in the unveiled light of God and in so far participating in God’s own life.⁵⁵

The Christian confession of eternal life should not lead to any suspicion of a desire of “evasion” from *this* world, which is God’s world. Barth would forcefully draw the implications of this in his later teaching on “reconciliation,” and in the ecclesiological sections of this topic, as can be seen in a passage such as this one:

Solidarity with the world means full commitment to it, unreserved participation in its situation, in the promise given it by creation, in its responsibility for the arrogance, sloth and falsehood which reign within it, in its suffering under the resultant distress (*Not*), but primarily and supremely in the free grace of God demonstrated and addressed to it in Jesus Christ, and therefore in its hope. [...] The community which knows the world is necessarily the community which is committed to it.⁵⁶

Barth’s personal commitment to a just social order, especially since the 1930’s (he was much more hesitant to express political views throughout the 1920’s) but already during his ministry in Safenwil (1911–1921), is a vivid confirmation and expression of this theological stance.

⁵⁴ Karl Barth, “The Christian in Society (1919),” in *The Word of God and Theology*, 35 (emphasis added, to reflect Barth’s own writing).

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, *Credo: A Presentation of the Chief Problems of Dogmatics With Reference to the Apostles’ Creed. Sixteen Lectures Delivered at the University of Utrecht in February and March, 1935*, trans. James Strathearn McNab (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 170–71.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London, New York: T&T Clark, 1961), 773; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/3.2, 884–85.

9 What Does Karl Barth Have to Say to Us, One Hundred Years Later?

The method Barth uses as he comments on the apostle Paul's text questions us. We may appreciate his intention to focus the attention on the "content" of the text, on the quest for a "word" within the words. The wrestling with the text in order to reach a theological interpretation of the biblical text has not lost any of its relevance. On the other hand, the tendency to superimpose his interpretation onto the apostle's message, to have his own claims, as a 20th century pastor, converge with Paul's to the point where the two are mingled or fused, is problematic. It feeds the fears of some, like Adolf von Harnack, who perceived a "prophetic" dimension and even the risk of "uncontrollable fanaticism" in Barth.⁵⁷ Barth's subsequent career shows that he did not view himself as a "prophet," but rather as someone who was called to render witness to the biblical message as he understood it, and as someone, crucially, who could never escape the fire of the critique contained precisely in that message.

A prophet is sent directly by God in order to proclaim God's word – God's word in this case is quite directly entrusted to the prophet. As the author of 2 Peter put it (2 P 1:21): "no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God (ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ Θεοῦ)." A witness, very differently, is called, not only by God but also by a human community, to give an account of the word as one hears it, within a human community, and so here – but this is true also of the prophet – one never finds oneself "next" or "above" the word, but always "under" it, as it were, and always in the *beginning* of the act of listening to it: "Any real knowledge of God knows, in its ultimate certainty, that it is not at the end, but at the beginning of the work, that it is

57 In 1923, Adolf von Harnack suspected that, with the new theological movement led by Barth, Gogarten and others, "historical knowledge and critical reflection" would eventually be replaced by "uncontrollable fanaticism." See Adolf von Harnack, "Fifteen Questions to the Despisers of Scientific Theology," in H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 29 (question 2). See also, in the same volume, Adolf von Harnack, "A Postscript to My Open Letter to Professor Karl Barth", 52: "Paul and Luther are for me not primarily subjects but objects of scientific theology as is Professor Barth and all those who express their Christianity as prophets or witnesses like preachers, whether they do it in biblical commentaries or in dogmatic writings etc."

never finished with the enigma and difficulties of life, it knows that, on the contrary, it is at every moment confronted anew to these.”⁵⁸

Barth wrote his commentary as the Western world was destroying itself, with the blessing of military chaplains and under the supposed protection of all kinds of “God with us” (*Gott mit uns*) which could be heard in different languages.

More than a century later, we should not expect to have to simply repeat what Barth said at the time. We are not at all in the “place” where he was as he wrote his commentary. There should thus be no attempt to repeat what he said or to speak in the manner in which he spoke. But it could well be that, for us too and for Christian theology today, we may need to “orient ourselves toward God” and toward the biblical texts – something which thankfully can be done in differing ways, according to various theological perspectives. We should not look for uniformity in this regard, but instead cherish a certain plurality of perspectives. But the quest of the “new world,” in Christ and in the action of the Holy Spirit, the movement of listening to the Scriptures, a movement which must be accompanied by a movement of listening to the world, all of this for the sake of the renewal of our mind – how could this quest, how could these two movements (God’s own movement and our own), which are and, with regard to our own movement, ought to be unceasing, not be the basic movements of Christian theology, still today?

58 “Wirkliche Gotteserkenntnis aber weiss sich gerade mit ihren letzten Gewiheiten (wie 8,31–39) nicht am Ende, sondern am Anfang der Arbeit, ist mit den Rtseln und Schwierigkeiten des Lebens nie fertig, sondern hebt von Stunde zu Stunde neu an mit ihnen zu ringen.” Barth, *Der Rmerbrief 1919*, 356.

IV *Römerbrief*, First edition (1919)

Günter Thomas

God's Moving Presence in History. Karl Barth's Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans of 1919 and its Problem-Creating Solutions

Abstract: The paper highlights five basic decisions in Karl Barth's first *Letter to the Romans* published in 1919: 1. a Christological realism concerning history and 2. its effective objectivity beyond the community of the church, 3. Barth's energetic understanding of the spirit, 4. his optimism concerning a progress in history and 5. his option for socialism as a theological background imagination. The paper interprets these basic decisions as "problem-creating solutions," i.e., as solutions that were valid in their time, yet at the same time create new problems in the present. To the extent that, according to one thesis of the paper, the five decisions to be found in the 1919 Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans are surprisingly powerful in shaping the church's theology in the present, they currently represent powerful theological temptations through their ambivalence. As the churches widely succumb to these temptations, the essay formulates critical queries to Barth's basic decisions – from the perspective of one hundred years later.

1 Introduction

Karl Barth's Commentary on the Letter to the Romans of 1919 remains one of the least explored areas of his oeuvre, both within Barth research and theological reception in general. Yet it was this book that prompted the red Safenwil pastor's call to an endowed professorship financed by American (sic!) Presbyterians, even though he was without a doctorate and without a habilitation or "second book."¹ In contrast to the academic oversight of this work, this paper argues

1 See Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (Munich: Kaiser, 1975), 135. It should therefore be counted among the bitter ironies of history that Barth's 1919 *Epistle to the Romans* is still awaiting translation into English. It speaks for itself that the research project of the Barth conferences in Emden began with the year 1921. See *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935): Aufbruch – Klärung – Widerstand*, eds. Michael Trowitzsch, Christian Link and Michael Beintker (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005). Barth himself is unambiguous, at least in his retrospective judgment after almost 50 years – with a

that the core theological insights of the 1919 Romans Commentary are among the most ‘received’ components of Karl Barth’s theology within the liberal Protestant churches of Western societies. Four leading ideas will be presented here as theological solutions which cannot be abandoned, even though they simultaneously create new problems for exploration.

2 The background of the 1919 Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans

By the years 1915 through 1918, it was clear that the long 19th century was definitely coming to an end. The defense of European culture, especially German culture, by force of arms represented a culmination and a turning point in the history and self-understanding of the people of Europe. But this is only one moment within a complex constellation of historical events. The real technological progress of the 19th century, combined with the expansive political history of colonialism, opened to a new vision of the world: that of one unified world, which shared a universal history of technical and cultural progress.

Increasing life expectancy due to medical progress, dramatically expanded educational opportunities, and widespread access to electricity, changed the geo-social economy of attention and the attitude toward life, at least among city dwellers.² Shipping became safer and expanded enormously. Railroad networks enabled an enormous expansion and acceleration of trade. After the turn of the century, the telephone and the gramophone entered everyday life and changed the acoustic-medial ‘dispositif’. The mere ability to hear words spoken by distant others powerfully supplemented reading. Insights into the structure of the cell led to groundbreaking discoveries and to profound changes in medicine. In retrospect, it would be foolish to deny this progress or to view it only negatively. It undeniably increased life expectancy and quality for broad strata of the population and was tied to a powerful philosophy of humanity, albeit under the dark shadow of colonialism. Indeed, it must not be forgotten that cultural side of imperialism was rooted in the prevalent moral ideas of the day.

reference to Richard Wagner’s Lohengrin: “But if one really wants to know ‘whence came I on the journey,’ the first Epistle to the Romans belongs to the minimum of what one must know.” Thus declares Barth in the preface to the 1963 reprint, cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 7. The translations are mine.

² On the changing economics of attention, see Jonathan Crary, *Aufmerksamkeit. Wahrnehmung und moderne Kultur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

What today is morally stigmatized as colonialism was a natural outgrowth of the thought of the moral vanguard of that time.

As has become a standard tale, the widespread optimism of the 19th century died on the battlefields of World War I. The poems of Gottfried Benn and Georg Trakl bear eloquent witness to this. From their disillusioning realism, one can easily draw the line to Oswald Spengler's "Decline of the Occident." The media scientist Norbert Bolz – a student of Jakob Taubes – traced these connections in his study, "Exodus from the Disenchanted World: Philosophical Extremism between the World Wars," and offered a compelling intellectual portrait of this intellectual ruinscape.³

The two grand narratives of either technical, cultural, and humanitarian progress, or creeping decay, were supplemented – at least by 1917 – with a third option, without which, neither Karl Barth's earliest phase of thought, nor his later developments, can be properly understood. This third narrative was rooted in the events of The October Revolution in Russia. Unlike any event since the Reformation, the Russian October Revolution so conspicuously demonstrated a realism of the revolutionary, that it captivated thought of intellectuals all over the world. It offered a convincing and successful, even imposing, manifestation of a revolutionary image of history, demonstrating that progress can take place not only before decay, but after as well, and that dialectics can occur in real history as real dialectics. For many contemporaries, the Revolution was a sensuous manifestation of the progressive forces in history inexorably marching toward decay.⁴ From the theoretical foundation of Marxism, it valorized an optimism for shaping society (even the world), which has survived beyond the end of the Soviet Union, and still shines brightly into the present (at least in part because the history of the gulags is not nearly as present in the public memory as its victims deserve).

These three powerful conceptions of history were present not only as ideas, but as existentially saturated possibilities in Barth's time. Consequently, they provided the context out of which he developed his pointedly organological-pneumatological conception of history in his First Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans of 1919. He did so in a non-deterministic resonant relationship to these surrounding forces, developments, and ideas.

One of the central theses of this work, which runs like a thread through the exegesis of the Romans, is that the Spirit – the Spirit of God – is life and energy

³ Norbert Bolz, *Auszug aus der entzauberten Welt. Philosophischer Extremismus zwischen den Weltkriegen* (München: Fink, 1989).

⁴ The fascination that emanated from this revolution is impressively described by Gerd Koenen, *Die Farbe Rot. Ursprünge und Geschichte des Kommunismus* (Munich: Beck, 2018).

in real history. Looking back 100 years, the Barth of 1919 could have become a pneumatologically oriented, energetic naturalist. He could also have developed into a religious vitalist. The radical realism, indeed the specific empiricism of 1919, could have led Barth, had he been a reader of Alfred North Whitehead, to a particular process theology that radically reflects and unfolds the immanence of creative and relative transcendence. Starting from the 1919 Letter to the Romans, Barth could have become a “process theologian of hope,”⁵ with marked overlaps and distinctions with later theologies of hope.⁶

The following reflections adopt a very particular hermeneutical perspective. It will not offer the perspective of a detailed historian, an ardent devotee, nor an archaeologist. It will ask what presuppositions, questions, and answers are present in the 1919 Letter to the Romans that can shed light on the acute theological challenges of our time. It is a question, so to speak, as Barth himself tried to do with Paul, of the insinuation and construction of a critical contemporaneity – without demanding intensive conversation with the interpreters of the last decades.⁷ This article will also resist burying the present theological possibilities

5 Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development; 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 135–83, gives with good reasons the title “Dialectical Theology in the Shadow of a Process Eschatology” to the entire phase in Barth's thought from August 1915 to November 1918. Largely unexplored are the factual connections that the very late Barth in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 and in the fragments from the bequest in Christological form seeks again to this pneumatologically formatted process theology.

6 An in-depth study of the obvious proximity of Barth's first commentary on Romans to Jürgen Moltmann's theology is a desideratum of research. Outlining some lines, albeit with less than satisfactory depth of analysis, is Sungchole Park, *Politische Theologie bei Karl Barth, Helmut Gollwitzer und Jürgen Moltmann. Eine politisch-hermeneutische Untersuchung zum Zusammenhang vom Linksbarthianismus und der “neuen” politischen Theologie* (Berlin: Springer, 2019). Michael Beintker sees in Barth's 1919 Letter to the Romans a “theology of hope,” indeed a “progress eschatology”; see *Die Dialektik in der ‘dialektischen Theologie’ Karl Barths. Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der “Kirchlichen Dogmatik”* (Munich: Kaiser, 1987), 110; Michael Beintker, “Der Römerbrief von 1919,” *Verkündigung und Forschung* 30/2 (1985): 22–28, 25; On the formatting as theology of hope, see also Harald Matern, “Geschichte und Eschatologie in Karl Barths ‘Römerbrief’ (1919),” in *Theologie im Umbruch der Moderne. Karl Barth's frühe Dialektische Theologie*, eds. Georg Pfeleiderer and Harald Matern (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014), 105–33, 106ss.

7 For what follows, I venture my own look at the material, even though there is already excellent work on this topic by Georg Pfeleiderer, Bruce McCormack, Harald Matern, Herbert Anzinger, and others. On the 1919 Letter to the Romans, see summarily Cornelis van der Kooi, “Erster Römerbrief,” in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 189–94, reconstructed in more detail in Cornelis van der Kooi, *Anfängliche Theologie: Der Denkweg des jungen Karl Barth (1909–1927)* (Munich: Kaiser, 1987), 63–119. See also Herbert Anzinger, *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis. Eine Studie zur ‘vordialektische’ Theologie Karl Barths*,

of the 1919 Letter to the Romans by reading it as a work-immanent historicization that can only be read in the light of Barth's own further developments.

My general thesis is the following: In the Letter to the Romans of 1919, at least five strategic, and convincing, theological decisions can be observed which have left a lasting mark on 20th century Protestant theology. Yet, these solutions have created new problems that must be addressed with honesty and a radical willingness to see flaws in Barth's original solutions. Barth's 1919 Letter to the Romans thus serves as a hermeneutical tool for identifying theological impasses in the present. His formative basic decisions are a diagnostic instrument for analyzing the ecclesiastical present, i.e., the performed theology in the churches.⁸

3 Barth's Five Strategic Decisions in the Letter to the Romans of 1919

3.1 The Christological Determination of History – Barth's Realism

In Christ “the new eon, the age of the Spirit has dawned for the whole new world.” Thus, Barth's entirely anti-apocalyptic claim. The turning point and the newness that happened in the resurrection is an objective and universal event. The subjective interpretations of the resurrection event are not only unin-

BEvTh 110 (Munich: Kaiser, 1991); and Michael Beintker, “Krisis und Gnade. Zur theologischen Deutung der Dialektik beim frühen Barth,” *Evangelische Theologie* 46, 4/5 (1986): 442–56; Michael Beintker, *Dialektik*, 105–27. More recent historical contextualizations are offered in *Theologie im Umbruch der Moderne. Karl Barths frühe Dialektische Theologie*, eds. Georg Pfeleiderer and Harald Matern (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014) and specifically Matern, “Geschichte und Eschatologie”.

⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 13. In what follows, I distinguish between *archival theology*, *laboratory theology*, and *performed theology* – and speak mostly of performed theology. *Archival theology* exists in libraries and in particular texts such as liturgies or in hymnals. *Performed theology* exists in current ecclesial communications of religious convictions and in present actions of the church. It is performatively present in sermons, in the speeches of public representatives of the church, in religious texts of use, in movements and their identity-securing agitation texts, in current religious educational offerings, etc. *Laboratory theology* is found, for example, in faculties, i.e., in rather irresponsible communication beyond everyday practical and actual ecclesiastical validations. It mostly combines interpretations of archived theology, private-religious imagination and attempts to connect with performed theology. This very text is laboratory theology looking at archival theology and criticizing performed theology.

teresting to Barth, but simply fail to reveal the meaning of the event. The resurrection created a paradigm shifting “new situation.”⁹ Amid the cultural upheaval of World War I, and the fermenting upheaval of the Russian Revolution, Barth declares, “The victory of life is assured. The power of God has become effective, and a dam has been built against ruin.” This is the “world message of the world fact.” For Barth, God’s existence for man is a “world truth” quite independent of religious perceptions.¹⁰

In objective history, that is in *Geschichte*, i. e., the “total life” which consists of various “stories and life-stories,”¹¹ Barth argues, the resurrection opens up a new story, a Christ-story alongside the story of Adam. It is this history in which history “now organically unfolds”¹² what is invested in the new life that is opened in the resurrection. This original event opens toward a “messianic, divine-earthly history”¹³ that is nevertheless simultaneously “real time” history. This not only creates a new way of seeing and interpreting the world, it is a moment in which the divine word of creation is spoken anew.¹⁴ Therefore, this newness extends into the natural structures of our world. Such bold naturalism of the resurrection is a purposeful rejection of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s creation naturalism.

Thus, for Barth, the resurrection event opens a fundamental antagonism in history. The one history of *Geschichte* becomes a pluriform history of conflicting histories. “Thus, in world history,” Barth writes, “two parallel power-effects face each other: the power-effect of death from Adam and power-effect of life from Christ.”¹⁵ This means that “on both sides a great cosmic connection opens up, which embraces all people at once.”¹⁶ Thus, history is a complex fabric of interwoven threads: “Every thread in the interwoven fabric of every world-historical moment is either a zeddel of Adam or impact of Christ.”¹⁷

The historical life of human beings now takes place “in Christ,” according to Barth’s formula. Barth’s “in Christ,” however, remains a rather vague theistic determination, which Barth curiously formulates in the neuter:

9 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 205.

10 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 205.

11 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 198.

12 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 195.

13 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 20.

14 A correspondingly precise alternative in contemporary theology is offered by Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Radikale Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2010).

15 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 174.

16 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 174.

17 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 173.

But 'in Christ' represents the divine which must appear in our existence, nature, gift, growth. For it is not a new *idea* of God, but a new divine *life-world*, atmosphere and possibility of existence that has appeared in the Christ on earth. [...] It appears in the Christ at all only as deed and fulfillment, only in the life process itself. It comes to honor as the 'spirit of life,' as the power of the coming world of God, as a new organizing principle.¹⁸

As if anticipating his own self-correction in the second edition of the Epistle to the Romans, Barth writes: "Instead of [the in Christ] it flashing at us judging and destroying, it now stands behind us as a given, as that which drives us. We are rooted in it and grow out of it."¹⁹ But even these formulas should not obscure the profoundly Christological realism that Barth advocates. "The occurrence of this power of God in the Christ" is, as Barth can always emphasize, "a historical event."²⁰ This power is undeniably present in real history. While the law only describes and prescribes, it is the power of the resurrection that elevates and brings about the "actual[...] history of God's deeds."²¹ "The power of the resurrection today has become a general world-prerequisite, the efficacy of which we may constantly count on."²² Not without an expressionistic gesture, Barth assures that a renewing history of God is taking place hidden in world history, gradually breaking out of the death history of the world.

The dialectic present in this first commentary on Romans in 1919 is a dialectic within history and between two histories in world history. It is, in the terminology of other commentators, a complementary dialectic that is finally resolved when the reign of God, the synthesis of eternity and time, is fully realized not only in Christ, but also in history.

3.2 An Objectivity that Transcends the Church – A "World Truth"

A major impulse in the 1919 Letter to the Romans is a profound critique of the Church. Operationalized through various decisions and distinctions, this critique is based on the objectivity of the occurrence of world truth in history, or the real transformation of the world in Jesus Christ. "Grace is the life that goes forward from God and with God. This life has become our life. This life in its self-empow-

¹⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 295–96.

¹⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 295.

²⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 301.

²¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 76.

²² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 463–64.

ered unfolding is our future.”²³ This self-empowerment – one might say this autopoietic dynamism – results in a power and objectivity that does not depend on theological-religious semantics for its efficacy; in other words, it does not require people knowing and describing it as “the new life” because it is already alive as lived life.

One might think this is an imperialistic gesture, a clever response to secularization, an open-hearted universalism, or a sleight-of-hand with which the church and theology comfort themselves in times of secularization, but Barth emphasizes again and again, “We count all as ‘us,’ Jews and Greeks, pious and worldlings, Christians and atheists.”²⁴ To participate in the new divine history that begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, explicit Christian faith is not necessary. Whoever is part of this real, though widely hidden, movement does not have to be in the church. Thus, Barth can state “The believers form the new international *people of God*.”²⁵ But for this new international of the resurrection, “the question ‘ecclesial’ or ‘secular’ is no longer a question. The world to come knows no such barriers.”²⁶

For this reason, I question Bruce McCormack’s assessment of Barth’s eschatology. McCormack ties participation in this history to a conscious decision; he states, with reference to Barth, “And wherever men and women are found who say yes to the Yes which was spoken to them in Christ, where use is made of the ‘new eyes and ears’ which are given through the power of God, there ‘the turn of worlds which took place in Christ continues.’”²⁷ Although the turn of worlds does demand to be grasped and seized by the power and force of the resurrection, it does not require that it do so by its Christian religious description.

Barth is driven by a deep realism and universalism, both of which claim not to rely on individual certainty: “A few individual ‘blisses’ of individual human beings are not the end of God’s ways.”²⁸ “It is world history” that is at stake for God according to Barth “because a world redemption is underway.”²⁹

Against the background of the objectivity of the resurrection, Barth’s ideas can come close to Leninist collectivism:

23 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 206.

24 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 206.

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21.

26 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21.

27 McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 142.

28 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 172.

29 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 173.

Divine historical thinking [...] is never directed directly at the individual, but at the people, the state, the polis (in this way ancient thinking is more original and healthy than modern thinking): it is directed to the background and context which independently gives dignity and meaning to the character and destiny of the individual [...] and to the fertile principle which allows the meaning of the whole of history to shine through in the existence of the individual.³⁰

Without recognizing the performative paradox regarding himself as writer, Barth holds, “God cannot come to honor in a merely ‘personal’ life. Truth is not for the individual.”³¹

Even in Christ, it is ultimately a matter of “faith versus religion and church.”³² Since the limits of the organization called church do not limit the impact of this event, the idea of “the anonymous Christian” is born in the 1919 Letter to the Romans. Therefore, one could also say Barth’s idea of path dependence, which is expanded upon in the Tambach lecture, “The Christian in Society,” and suggests that Christ can be in any people beyond the church, has its origins here.³³

3.3 The Spirit as Power in History – a Realistic and Energetic Understanding of the Spirit

Starting from Romans 1:4, Barth interprets the Spirit of God as the “power of resurrection.”³⁴ “Power went out from God in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. [...] For in the world there are also powers [...] and they are stronger than our ideas.”³⁵ Through the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, which is understood as the working of the Spirit, “total existence” is transformed into an “organism of life.”³⁶ History becomes the history of the spirit. “The same spirit of life that makes us victorious fighters of the new world, because we are children of God, also gives our situation the historical depth and perspective that immediately connects the present with the future. The spirit in us is nothing

30 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 452.

31 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 272.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 164.

33 Karl Barth, “Der Christ in der Gesellschaft (1919),” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, Gesamtausgabe III.48 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 546–98.

34 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 15.

35 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 19.

36 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 297.

more and nothing less than the expectation, indeed the deposit of the new coming world of God itself [...]"³⁷ This spirit is in human beings.

The Spirit bridges the gap between what has already grown and what is yet to develop. The Spirit in human beings is the "germ of the coming world of God."³⁸ Barth's pneumatological universalism reflects the universalism of the forces emanating from the resurrection: "[...] for the new purpose of God is for the world, not for the individual."³⁹ The action of the Spirit is as real as the other forces in society. And it transcends the Church, just as it transcends every community of faith. Given the cosmic implications of the resurrection, the Spirit of life is equally far-reaching. It is the name for the power behind "organic development."⁴⁰

Barth's pneumatological universalism has epistemic implications: This *Geschichte Christi* knows no spectators, it aims "not only at noticing but at participating."⁴¹ This powerful story does not only seek to be understood, but people are "seized"⁴² by it. It is a matter of allowing oneself to be placed in the "process of divine growth."⁴³ For Barth, it is a spectator who "does not live in the thing but makes glosses about it."⁴⁴

3.4 An Astonishing Optimism about Historical Development

"But we have not ideas behind us, but the power of all powers, which is therefore also the idea of all ideas: the power of God."⁴⁵ On this basis, in midst of the cultural devastation and revolutionary hope characteristic of the years between 1916 and 1918, Barth writes a document of unconcealed religious and theo-political optimism. From the objectivity of the movement in which man stands since the Resurrection, there arises an astonishing certainty and optimism built on the idea of "God with us!" "It is not for nothing that the overall situation has changed from the ground up, not for nothing that the most tremendous cosmic change since creation has taken place. With the breakthrough: Immanuel!

37 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 313.

38 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 321.

39 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 14.

40 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 12.

41 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 12.

42 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 19.

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 209.

44 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 210.

45 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 19.

God with us! [cf. Mt 1:23], which took place in the present time, in the messianic present, in the decisive turn of the eons in heaven, a process of life is opened on earth.”⁴⁶ For Barth, God is “the living God who proves himself in history as the faithful and victorious one.”⁴⁷ Similar formulations are found a little later in the Tambach lecture. Barth is deeply convinced of the present, effective, and expansive reign of God transforming the world. It opens an existence that “increasingly gains ground from his rule.”⁴⁸ It invites participation “in God’s ever greater and richer history of victory [...] toward the dawn of dawning salvation.”⁴⁹ “Where that supremacy of God” is restored in the resurrection of life, life can “flourish.”⁵⁰

The Karl Barth of 1919 is deeply convinced – for theological, and possibly, for equally prominent socialist reasons – that history is neither a tragedy nor an eternal return of the same. There is not only movement in history, but a clearly determined direction in the movement of history. And there is not only one direction, but a constant approach to one goal – namely, the victory of history initiated by the risen, living Christ. All human revolutions are but pale mirrors of God’s own progressive and advancing revolution in history. Barth is certain: “The world is now placed in the breaking dawn of redemption.”⁵¹ It can, as Barth says in this first commentary on Romans, only go ‘upward’ for humanity: “What gives us joy is the fact that, according to God’s counsel, through the power of the resurrection, a harmony and a hope have come into the course of humanity which may well be temporarily clouded and obscured again, but which cannot be disgraced and given over to the lie once and for all. We place ourselves in this reoriented course of humanity [...]”⁵²

⁴⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 167. It is noteworthy that Barth is able to use the semantics of “God with us” rather cavalierly on his own account in the 1919 Letter to the Romans. Thus, on pages 165, 167, 205, 250, 270, and 273 as a translation of ‘Immanuel’; pointedly critical only 513: “The slogan ‘God with us!’ is a coveted and useful weapon on the political battlefield.”

⁴⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 72.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 309.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 411.

⁵⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 410.

⁵¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 104.

⁵² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 173.

3.5 “...more than Leninism” – Socialism as the Background of Imagination

A great deal of printer’s ink has already been used to illuminate Barth’s relationship to socialism in general and to religious socialism in particular. Barth’s first commentary on the Epistle to the Romans indisputably belongs to a period of intense engagement with religious socialism. At least four levels of this engagement can be distinguished, which in their interplay constitute, his ‘permanent flirtation with socialism’:

1. “Karl Barth was a committed socialist, of that there can be no doubt,” Bruce McCormack concludes regarding Barth’s fundamental political orientation.⁵³ Despite all his disappointments with concrete party politics, Barth stuck to this preference. But this personal political preference corresponds to three different theological strategies, all of which can be observed in outline in the 1919 commentary on Romans.

2. Barth is critical of religious socialism; he opposes applying a religious charge to socialism as well as a synchronization or even a short-circuiting of the kingdom of God with concrete political events or demands. “Strike and general strike and street fight, if it must be, but offer no religious justification and glorification of it! [...] Social-democratic, but not religious-social democratic!⁵⁴ His criticism of religious socialism has its place here: “The divine must not be politicized and the human must not be theologized, not even in favor of democracy and social democracy.”⁵⁵

3. The second strategy, which is only at first glance incompatible with the first, consists of what Matthias Gockel calls the theologization of socialism.⁵⁶ In this appropriation of socialism, Barth adopts rhetorical tropes and terms from the discourse surrounding socialism and uses them in a radicalizing appropriation of models or metaphorical transference to describe his own theological cause. Thus the “divine world revolution”⁵⁷ aims at the “new international peo-

⁵³ Bruce L. McCormack, “Longing for a New World: On Socialism, Eschatology and Apocalyptic in Barth’s Early Dialectical Theology,” in *Theologie im Umbruch der Moderne*, 135–49, 136. Interestingly, McCormack completely skips the 1919 Letter to the Romans in this analysis.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 520–21.

⁵⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 509.

⁵⁶ Matthias Gockel, “Karl Barths theopolitische Sozialismus,” in *Umstrittenes Erbe. Lesarten der Theologie Karl Barths*, eds. Matthias Gockel, Andreas Pangritz and Ulrike Sallandt (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), 41–60; by way of suggestion Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus. Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1972), 132.

⁵⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 507 and 516.

ple of God.”⁵⁸ But in this revolution the ultimate overcoming is expected and brought about by God himself. It is in this context that Barth's famous remarks on the radical negation of the institutions that sustain the world fall. Christianity

does not compete with the state, it negates it, both its presuppositions and its essence. It is *more* than Leninism [...] in the sense that the consummation it expects is not the goal and result of a development of a gradual ascent of humanity, but the revelation of a new creation or the content of a new knowledge. *This* program cannot become the object of an 'ethics'.⁵⁹

Because the revolution of God is “before all revolutions.” The love of Christ makes Christians, standing in “the violence of God's justice,”⁶⁰ “remain faithful to hope, to restlessness, to longing, to radical and permanent revolution.”⁶¹ It is the deeper correlations between socialism and a radical Christianity that, for Barth, factually justify the metaphorical transfers.

4. In the shadow of negation in critique and affirmation, Barth can then also quite concretely promote socialism in the formation of analogies. Concisely Barth states: “[...] you will hardly be able to place yourselves anywhere else than on the extreme left.”⁶² Deliberately playing with ambiguity through metaphorical transference, Barth formulates,

Spirit is never romantic-conservative. The spirit does not take the conditions as they are. The spirit is not interested in the preservation of what has existed so far, but in its transformation and rebirth. Where there is spirit, there is always the need to break the hard shells of natural and historical existence, to break the truce with the idols set up by the previous development [...] Spirit in the present cannot be anything other than revolution, even the revolution of that which calls itself revolution in the present.⁶³

Consequently, the goal is “not to improve the present state, but to replace it.”⁶⁴ The dominant attitude of Christians should be a mixture of “contempt, surren-

⁵⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21.

⁵⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 506–7.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 247.

⁶¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 353. The keyword of permanent revolution is a direct reference to Karl Marx, see p. 353, n. 91. “What the Christ brings is indeed revolution, the dissolution of all dependencies.” (196).

⁶² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 508.

⁶³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 316.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 504. To eliminate this purposeful ambiguity in Barth's rejection of the state in an overly benevolent interpretation is a serious weakness of the excellent study by Anzinger, *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis*, 212–3. It is astonishing that Barth does not want to make a distinction between democracy and tyranny at this point. “All politics, as a struggle for

der, and relative acceptance.”⁶⁵ In the existing world, Christians live “without lifting a finger for the preservation of existing conditions.”⁶⁶

This commentary on the Epistle to the Romans contains traces of what will be called parables of God’s presence by Barth a little later in the so-called Tam-bach lecture. Already, however, in the Romans 1919 Commentary Barth interprets these traces as a matter of openness to “every real illumination of the great goal of hope in the historical development,”⁶⁷ that is of participating “when the real, hopeful signs of the time indicate the divine forward movement.”⁶⁸ For Barth, these hopeful signs are given in socialism.

The critical attitude toward religious socialism, the theologization of socialism, and a pathos-rich permanent criticism of the “existing” from its secure location in capitalism characterize what can be called Barth’s permanent flirtation with so-called leftist politics focused on revolution and changing conditions.

4 Temptations from Problem-Creating Solutions – Critical Queries

A look at the performative theology of the churches of the present makes it unmistakably clear that if one can speak at all of a resonance of Barth’s theology for the proclamation of the church, Barth’s first “Epistle to the Romans,” which has been not in the center of theological research is of astounding topicality.⁶⁹ The

power, as the diabolical art of majorization, is fundamentally dirty. Even the noblest, purest disposition of its bearers does not change the antagonism of its essence by a hair.” *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 502. The problems inherent in this are clearly seen by Marco Hofheinz & Kai-Ole Eberhardt, “Einleitung. Der politische Barth. Herausforderungen der Theologie Karl Barths für die Gegenwart,” in *Römerbrief und Tageszeitung! Politik in der Theologie Karl Barths*, eds. Marco Hofheinz and Kai-Ole Eberhardt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2021), 1–28, 20–21.

⁶⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 505, citing Ernst Troeltsch, *Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 72.

⁶⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 506.

⁶⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 486.

⁶⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 487.

⁶⁹ Within Barth scholarship, however, there are two effective strategies of historicizing Barth that tend to immunize against such a direct bridge between 1919 and 2019 or 2021. Thus, individual stages of Karl Barth’s theology are historicized and thus relativized either a) in their immanent work-historical and idea-historical development or b) in their respective time- and context-relatedness. But with this historicizing approach, the respective potential of the texts for orientation or disorientation in the present is systematically obscured. In contrast, the Letter

aforementioned five central ideas belong 100 years later to the basic stock of performative theology of wide areas of Western liberal churches: The churches seek real change of real history – albeit change that they themselves have set in motion; the self-perceived causes of the church far exceeds its own boundaries and those of the Christian religion. A broadly conceived ‘divine’ spirit of humanity and life in the midst of history and creation calls them to operate in religious and political alliances that extend beyond traditional ecumenical boundaries. Because of a sense of the presence of transcendence within immanence, world change is believed to be as necessary as it is possible. The morning glow of a better future may be dystopically clouded by the climate crisis, but the faith of “Yes, we can!” persists. And it remains that the heart of the true Christian beats on the left in the current debates. The existing stands in need of radical change. Socialism is for many the core of political hope. In short, one is struck by this strong pattern of similarities with large parts of contemporary performative ecclesial theology.

An analytically clear, phenomenologically realistic, and theologically meta-critical view of the present, however, leads to this insight: All five of Barth’s impulses are powerfully present. But for all that they solve they also create new problems. They are correct insights with a tremendous potential for seduction, which has been largely effective in the churches. The present problems cannot be naively causally attributed to Barth’s theology. However, there are perplexing patterns of similarities and resonant relationships. The seductions can only be briefly marked at this point.

1. The matter of Christianity is not personal faith, but participation in a history of God (History). This insight became a signature of theo-political Protestantism in the twentieth century. But one-hundred years later, in view of the inexorable shrinkage of the churches, the question arises whether the theological polemics against a personal Christianity in so-called emancipatory circles do not in fact assume a stable ecclesiology. Does Barth’s criticism of personal Christianity not simultaneously claim a personal Christianity and an ecclesiastical organization from which the historical action of the church arises (as implied by the very actions of Barth as pastor and theologian) which it itself also always claims to criticize? The justified impression arises that the widespread fundamental criticism of “personal Christianity” leads to self-dissolution. The question – where do revolutionaries come from, if they are not spiritual migrants from ‘pious milieus’? – arises. The gesture of arrogant, and mostly elitist criticism,

to the Romans from the year 1919 is to be considered here in its present effectiveness (simultaneity) and at the same time its ability to resonate through time (non-simultaneity).

of personal Christianity proves to be a dead end. Much is then a whistling in the woods to distract from the experience of the absence of God and from the fear of the disappearance of Christianity.

2. The realism of God's presence that starts and changes with the resurrection of Jesus Christ undoubtedly has its legitimacy against a metaphysical theology of a God who determines everything omnipotently. If one looks, however, at the continuations of this approach in Jürgen Moltmann, a theology of the weak presence of God remains a theology of the hidden power of God even there. In Barth's Letter to the Romans, a theology of immanence is counterbalanced by a 'strong' theology of God's kingdom breaking into immanence from beyond history. If, however, this 'beyond' of God's independent action no longer appears theologically comprehensible, then God's eschatological power is in effect transferred to people, who want to change the world. If this happens, then church and theology are either buried under the problems of anthropodicy, or they succumb to the temptation to turn their gaze theologically away from the fields of death and debris of history and toward moral indignation.

3. One-hundred years after Barth's first commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, the universality of the Spirit's work in the social forces beyond the church proves to pose the problem of how the church can be responsibly formulated. How this general spirit of life differs from the spirit of Jesus Christ coming through the proclaimed word can hardly be articulated. In short: pneumatology has the power to undermine the insight that the church is a *creatura verbi* from the Spirit of God. Pneumatologically, the boundary between church and world is dissolved in such a way that the shrinking of the churches can only be met with a mixture of indifference, fatalism, and defiant pleasure in the smaller number of those with the right moral and theo-political inclination.

4. In 1919 there were good reasons to see valid options for the future in the October Revolution in Russia and in socialism. One-hundred years after the 1919 Romans letter commentary, however, the flirtation with socialism, which is present in Karl Barth and continues to shape many churches, raises numerous questions. The fact that this spectator socialism is cultivated from the safe prosperity of capitalism is the smallest problem. Much more worthy of consideration is that among the clandestine and the loud theological protagonists of real socialism, no reappraisal of the worldwide failure of all variants of socialism took place or is taking place. In view of the frequently presented (Barthian) claim that socialism is not simply a better utopic vision, but the better option in terms of real political practice corresponding to the Gospel, the loud silence in view of the global failure and the multitude of victims is astonishing. The inability of the real existing examples of socialism to put freedom or justice into practice, to generate neither prosperity nor an atmosphere that protects human dignity, seem-

ingly does not inspire critical reflection. For many, socialism remains the theologically legitimized political place of longing, even beyond a left-wing Protestant revolutionary pathos. This inability to engage in necessary self-criticism indicates that the liberal Protestant preference for socialism and its derivatives is not a purely political-pragmatic one after all, but rests on deeper-seated errors. Without willingness to historically validate a political vision for theological ethics, however, counter-worldly alternatives, misleading illusions, and sheer wishful thinking can no longer be distinguished. This lack of willingness to learn also threatens to discredit the left-utopian parts of Karl Barth's project.

What is at issue – in the spirit of Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans – are elementary questions of theological ontology: What possibilities can be realized between the resurrection of Christ as the dawn of the new and the disruptive coming of the kingdom of God in the church and in this world, that is, “between the times”? How far is this in-between time of the efficacy of the Spirit marked by the cross of Christ, how far by the resurrection, and not least by the ascension, i. e., a qualified absence?

5. Barth's theo-political optimism concerning the prospect of development within history resonated with the political and cultural spirit of awakening that predominated the globe in the decades between 1965 and 1995. One-hundred years after 1919, the optimism of this commentary on the Epistle to the Romans seems stale. In many parts of the world, such optimism finds little support. This is all the more true in the midst of the Corona crisis. Even a theological rejection of a tragic worldview cannot avoid acknowledging that the presence of the resurrection story is not only hidden but absent in many spatial and temporal ‘presences’ of these worlds. When the ‘robust’ hope for a final redeeming in-break of the kingdom of God, which Barth never abandoned, falls into crisis or even dissolves altogether, a desperate hope grows in its place.⁷⁰ After the long

70 On the dynamics of desperate hope, see Günter Thomas, *Im Weltabenteuer Gottes leben. Impulse zur Verantwortung für die Kirche* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020), 210 – 66. The reading of the 1919 Letter to the Romans is confronting with a deep ambiguity that will remain present in all of Barth's later writings. The new life blossoms. It unfolds in its own strength and power. It is a victorious process that unfolds out of the resurrection. But: however close the victory may be, it is not yet here. There is a considerably large metaphorical space of battle and struggle in the 1919 Letter to the Romans as well as still in the late passages of Barth's Christology. A classic account of this motif of drama in Barth's theology, present in various parts of the oeuvre, is Hans-Wilhelm Pietz, *Das Drama des Bundes. Die dramatische Denkform in Karl Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998), but also Robert J. Peeters, “Das Drama der Vollendung: die pneumatologisch-eschatologische Dimension der Auferstehung nach Karl Barth im Licht der Frage nach der nachösterlichen Heilsgeschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie* 4/2 (1988): 259 – 279 with many references to *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.

twentieth century, Barth's sentences seem distant, even enthusiastically illusionary: "In the face of the 'reality' of the world, we may assert the greater reality of God, which breaks through the misty veils of affliction and challenge victoriously. Faith in the hereafter? Yes, but faith in the hereafter, which is powerfully and visibly becoming this world."⁷¹

5 Present Absence and Coming Presence

Unlike the situation in 1919, the utopian decades are now behind us. The hot lava of optimistic passion that spewed from the volcanoes of political utopia has not only buried many villages and their inhabitants but has also cooled down.⁷² Neither theology as a discipline nor the church need succumb to the aforementioned temptations. What theology and churches certainly need more of in the coming decades is a stronger dose of apocalyptic thinking – thinking that allows us to think more radically about the "not yet," the shadow of sin, and the lamentation that arises from waiting.⁷³ We might be forced to wait and – in the power of the Spirit mind you! – to experience the presence of the absence of God – in expectation of a new, powerful presence. It is undoubtedly a crucial impulse emanating from Barth's 1919 Letter to the Romans that genuine and radical hope is possible in times of cultural and political devastation. Today, if performative theology, supported by university laboratory theology, both deepens theological realism and acknowledges the absence of God, new hope can grow from the presence of the Spirit of Consolation.⁷⁴ This would then be a hope that lives beyond a developmental optimism rather in forms of paradoxical interventions.

If a theology of the present becomes a theology of the coming present in a present absence, then a radical hope can emerge in times when despairing hope paralyzes Western cultures and churches. We need the theological courage

⁷¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 153.

⁷² For a still-unrevised lucid critique of Barth's essentially utopian theo-political thought, see Wolf-Dieter Marsch, "'Gerechtigkeit im Tal des Todes'. Christlicher Glaube und politische Vernunft im Denken Karl Barths," in *Theologie zwischen gestern und morgen. Interpretationen und Anfragen zum Werk Karl Barths*, eds. Wilhelm Dantine and Kurt Lüthi (Munich: Kaiser, 1968), 167–91.

⁷³ A pointedly apocalyptic reading of the Letter to the Romans is offered by Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁷⁴ A lone voice indeed on the absence of God is Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973). The absence of the power of resurrection in the presence of the Spirit must not be confused with simplistic notions of a death of God or a death of the God of metaphysics.

to add a short sentence to Barth's statement, "We do indeed live in the presence of God's future."⁷⁵ We know today: we do indeed live in the *presence* of God's future, but we also live in the *absence* of God's future. This is the only seemingly paradoxical basis of real hope and the standpoint from which to resist the temptations mentioned.

75 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 153.

Matthias Gockel

“More than Leninism” – Karl Barth’s Theological Socialism

Abstract: Fifty years after Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt’s controversial thesis about the “inversion” of socialism into Barth’s theology, a new look at the issue is warranted. We will show that Marquardt’s intuition was largely correct but needs further elaboration and clarification, especially on the basis of newly available sources. The first section describes Barth’s “theologization of socialism” (D. Schellong) between 1906 and 1921, when Barth wanted to understand socialism better than the socialists did. The second section sketches Barth’s theo-political vision in the *Church Dogmatics*. The conclusion summarizes the evidence. We argue that the revolutionary character of Barth’s theology implies the social order. His transfer of the concept of (social) revolution from politics to theology does not signify a de-politicizing of the concept. On the contrary, for Barth, the kingdom of God is the original socialist, or even communist, movement.

1 Introduction

Karl Barth was a socialist, as Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt emphasized in 1972.¹ Marquardt did not only highlight Barth’s socialist leanings in political matters. More importantly, he argued that there was a “clearly recognizable” influence and an “inversion of socialism into Barth’s theology,”² including the *Church Dog-*

1 Cf. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus. Das Beispiel Karl Barths*, 3rd ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1985), 39. Marquardt’s book displays a strong constructive interest. A socialist reading of Barth based on a closer look at the historical-theological contexts that shaped Barth’s theology is offered by Peter Winzeler, *Widerstehende Theologie: Karl Barth 1920–35* (Berlin: Alektor, 1982).

2 Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus*, 15, 37. Marquardt’s thesis was introduced to Anglophone readers by George Hunsinger, ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976). The second, expanded edition of Hunsinger’s collection from 2017 goes hand in hand with a renewed interest in the socialist heritage of dialectical theology, especially in the work of Helmut Gollwitzer, Marquardt’s mentor in Berlin. See W. Travis McMaken, *Our God Loves Justice: An Introduction to Helmut Gollwitzer* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017); Andreas Pangritz, “Der ganz andere Gott will eine ganz andere Gesellschaft”: *Das Lebenswerk Helmut Gollwitzers* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018).

matics. He thus challenged the view that the socialist impact was limited to Barth's work as "red Pastor of Safenwil."³

Marquardt's thesis provoked some protest. It was unusual enough that a Christian theologian in the first half of the 20th century sympathized with socialism, but the claim of socialist influences on Barth's *theology* seemed to go too far for some interpreters. Fifty years later, in a time of global attacks on human rights, civil liberties, and the social fabric of human life,⁴ a new look at Barth's socialism and the correlation with his theology is warranted. My analysis will show that Marquardt's intuition was largely correct. His notion of an "inversion" of socialism, however, needs further elaboration and should be understood not only as the social reflection of Barth's "praxis" but also as an intellectual transfer of the concept of (social) revolution from the realm of politics to the realm of theology.⁵

The first section describes Barth's "theologization of socialism"⁶ between 1906 and 1921. Barth held on to the Religious Socialists' critique of capitalist inequality, while he rejected any identification of the kingdom of God with a particular political order.⁷ He wanted to understand socialism better than the socialists did and famously claimed that Christianity is "more than Leninism."⁸ The second, briefer section sketches Barth's theo-political vision⁹ in the *Church Dogmatics*. The conclusion summarizes the accumulated evidence that the revolu-

³ For the background of this expression, see *Barth in Conversation, Volume 3: 1964–1968*, ed. Eberhard Busch and Karlfried Froehlich, trans. by the Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, eds. Darrell L. Guder, Matthias Gockel, and David C. Chao (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 342–368. From here on, translations are my own.

⁴ See Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now: The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani (Lanham; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), and the interview with Agamben "Where is Science Going?," *Organisms – Journal of Biological Sciences*, 4 (2020): 105–9.

⁵ At times, Marquardt's suggests this much, but his method of *gegenständliches Denken* implies an unnecessary contrast between materialism and ontology (see Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus*, 321–6).

⁶ I adopt the term "theologization of socialism" from Dieter Schellong, "Barth von links gelesen – ein Beitrag zum Thema: 'Theologie und Sozialismus,'" *Zeitschrift für evangelische Ethik* 17 (1973): 238–50, 243. English trans.: "On Reading Karl Barth from the Left," in Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 2nd ed., 101–16.

⁷ See Christian Link, "Barth und der religiöse Sozialismus," in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 71–75.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 506.

⁹ On Barth's "theo-politics" see Sueng Hoon (Paul S.) Chung, *Karl Barth und die Hegelsche Linke. Die Revolution Gottes bei Karl Barth in Auseinandersetzung mit der polit-ökonomischen Anthropologie bei Karl Marx* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1993), 33–9, 108–13.

tionary character of Barth’s theology, which has been often noted,¹⁰ is not limited to theological concepts but also implies the social order. Hence, the transfer of the concept of revolution from politics to theology does not signify a de-politicizing of the concept.¹¹ On the contrary, Barth’s thinking plays an integral part in the history of the socialist movement since 1848, when the Manifesto of the Communist Party was published.¹²

2 The Transfer of Socialism from Politics to Theology

2.1 Socialism, Capitalism, and the Gospel (1906 – 1911)

On January 20, 1906, during his third semester as student in Bern, Barth spoke to his fraternal comrades in the *Zofingia* Association on the “Social Question.” He describes recent cases of social conflict and critically remarks that in Switzerland, too, “the rift [*Riss*] between capital and labor”¹³ continues to widen. By referring to the opposition between “capital” and “labor,” Barth adopts Marxist terminology. He does not consider the Social Question from the perspective of “so-called ‘good society’, whose motives for participating in social work are largely [...] *prophylactic* and defensive,”¹⁴ seeking to secure the existing political order. Instead, he suggests that the modern Social Question is an expression of the basic problem of human life, which found its religious solution in the *Reformation* and its political solution in the *Revolution*: the double responsibility to-

¹⁰ For example, see James D. Smart, ed., *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914–1925* (Louisville: John Knox, 1964).

¹¹ *Contra* Eberhard Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Zürich-Köln; Gütersloh: Benziger Verlag; Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982), 125. In the wake of the political shift in Eastern Europe after 1989, some interpreters relegate Marquardt’s book, and ‘left-wing Barthianism’ generally, to the dustbin of history. They present Barth as “theologian of freedom” but ignore his advice that freedom and socialism are correlates. They also fail to see that Barth criticized state socialism from a left-wing and not from a centrist perspective. See, for example, Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth und der “Kommunismus.” Erfahrungen mit einer Theologie der Freiheit in der DDR* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2013).

¹² See Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus*, 369–70 (Postscript 1985).

¹³ Karl Barth, “Zofingia und sociale Frage,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1905–1909*, eds. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt, Gesamtausgabe III.21 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1992), 61–103, 74.

¹⁴ Barth, “Zofingia und sociale Frage,” 75.

wards God as well as humanity, which Jesus formulated as the task and commandment of loving God and one's neighbor. Barth cautions that the solution of the Social Question will not bring about the kingdom of God, although it belongs to the "necessary premises for achieving that goal."¹⁵

Barth does not offer further historical illustrations. Still, basic features of his theo-political vision already become clear: he correlates faith in God and social revolution and places both in eschatological perspective.

Five years later, Barth came to Safenwil (Aargau) as a Reformed pastor. Many villagers were employed in the textile industry and lived under miserable social conditions. On December 17, 1911, Barth delivered a lecture at the local Workers' Association, which aroused considerable public interest, led to closer relations with organized socialism, and was published in the cantonal newspaper of the Social Democratic Party.¹⁶

Barth does not postulate a mere identity between Jesus and the social movement. He rather asks for their "inner relation."¹⁷ In doing so, he criticizes the Christian church, which complains about the "disdainful materialism" of the socialists but for 1800 years has accepted social misery as *fait accompli*. For Barth, the ecclesial separation of spirit from matter is the "grave apostasy" from the gospel of Jesus Christ and from "the *one* reality of the kingdom of God"¹⁸ that nourishes soul *and* body. The gospel and socialism differ in their proclamation, but they share the same goal: overcoming social misery.

For Barth, the socialists' critique corresponds to Jesus' statement about obstacles in the coming of God's kingdom. He cites their analysis: "Capitalism is the system of acquisition which turns the proletarian into a proletarian, that is, into a dependent paid worker, whose existence is eternally insecure. The means necessary for the operation of labor (capital, factories, machines, raw materials) are the *private property* of the [...] factory owner." The worker "owns nothing but his working power, which he hands over to the factory owner" in re-

15 Barth, "Zofingia und sociale Frage," 76.

16 Karl Barth, "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, eds. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt, in conjunction with Herbert Helms and Friedrich W. Marquardt, Gesamtausgabe III.22 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 380–417. Barth often speaks synonymously of "socialism" and "social democracy." To avoid confusion with today's Social Democracy, I consistently use the term "socialism," except for official names. In later years, Barth expressed strong reservations about political parties. In a letter from July, 21, 1968, he bemoaned that German as well as Swiss Social Democracy had become "so lame." Karl Barth, *Briefe 1961–1968*, eds. Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt, Gesamtausgabe V.6 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1975), 488 (Letter 292).

17 Barth, "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung," 390.

18 Barth, "Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung," 395–6.

turn for a payment, while the net proceeds of their “common labor” are added to the capital and property of the factory owner.¹⁹

Barth then approvingly paraphrases the socialists’ response: It is “an injustice” that the worker is only just compensated for this work, while the owner receives the entire gain and profit of the common labor. “This system of acquisition must therefore *fall*, above all its basic pillar: private ownership [...] of the means of production.” The state or the community must be “the owner of the means of production.”²⁰

As in 1906, Barth acknowledges that capitalism and socialism are modern phenomena, although the underlying problem was already known in antiquity. He points out that church and state have “surrounded the concept of private property with all kinds of barriers of sanctity and inviolability,” but the gospel “condemns the attitude of ‘what is mine is mine’ with a sharpness [...] that is perhaps nowhere to be found in all socialist literature. Jesus is more socialist than the socialists.”²¹

2.2 Radical Socialism and Radical Christianity (1913 – 1917)

2.2.1 Basic Motives (1913 – 1915)

On Sunday, August 31, 1913, Barth’s sermon praised August Bebel, the recently deceased chairman of the German Social Democratic Party, as “fighter for the ideal of a new humanity.” Bebel often had “grasped what Jesus wanted much better and followed it much more energetically than most so-called Christians.”²² In another sermon, Barth explained that Christians are called to form “the holy consciousness of solidarity that carries the misery of the world in its heart, not to sigh and shake its head about it, but to lend a hand so that conditions become different.”²³ At the same time, he reminded his audience that God is “quite different from what you can imagine!”²⁴

In the autumn and winter of 1913 – 14, Barth intensely studied the “Workers’ Question” and consulted reference works by Heinrich Herkner, Werner Sombart,

19 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung,” 398.

20 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung,” 398 – 9.

21 Barth, “Jesus Christus und die soziale Bewegung,” 399 – 400.

22 Karl Barth, Sermon on August 31, 1913, in *Predigten 1913*, eds. Nelly Barth and Gerhard Sauter, Gesamtausgabe I.8 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, ²1994), 429 – 43, 434 – 35.

23 Karl Barth, Sermon on February 23, 1913, in *Predigten 1913*, 65 – 77, 72.

24 Karl Barth, Sermon on May 25, 1913, in *Predigten 1913*, 249 – 61, 252.

and Paul Pflüger. His extensive notes document a learning process: He no longer talks about the “common labor” of worker and entrepreneur and realizes that the former is entirely dependent for his maintenance on the latter. The partners in the “work contract” seem to be equal, but in truth there are a number of serious disadvantages for the worker.²⁵

Barth then describes the ideology of the “ruling classes” who take it for granted that the workers accept their own position: “In a misunderstood interpretation of the Christian concept of subordination, the superiority of the entrepreneur, based on capital ownership, is regarded as divine order, while rebellion against it is regarded as ‘indignation,’ ‘overthrow,’ etc.”²⁶ For Barth, the issue is not a matter of personal attitudes but of structural-historical conditions: The class antagonism is “the product of the present economic order,” and the struggle for workers’ power seeks the “overcoming this antagonism, that is, peace.”²⁷ Barth demands: political democracy must be complemented by “economic social democracy.”²⁸

In a number of public speeches, Barth addresses the relationship between the gospel and socialism. He thinks that socialist protest or rebellion is “obedience” to the will of God; it is “not directed against people” but “against conditions.”²⁹ Moreover, the revolutionary drive of socialism with the goal of a universal “human community of classes and peoples” comes closer to true faith in God and in “a ‘beyond’ of war and capitalism”³⁰ than the Christian churches do. Barth aims at a *mutual radicalization*: Christianity is radicalized by socialism and socialism by Christianity. He concludes: “A real socialist must be a Christian and a real Christian must be a socialist.”³¹

In the meantime, World War I had begun. Due to the widespread nationalism in church, politics and science, the aforementioned radicalization seemed all the

25 Karl Barth, “Die Arbeiterfrage,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, 573–682, 580.

26 Barth, “Arbeiterfrage,” 583.

27 Barth, “Arbeiterfrage,” 583, 640.

28 Karl Barth, “Festrede an der Novemberfeier des Grütlivereins Ober-Entfelden,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, 683–89, 685.

29 Karl Barth, “Evangelium und Sozialismus,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, 729–33, 731.

30 Karl Barth, “‘Die Hilfe’ 1913,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes, in conjunction with Friedrich W. Marquardt, Gesamtausgabe III.48 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2012), 61–76, 73.

31 Karl Barth, “Krieg, Sozialismus und Christentum [I],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 86–96, 93. This maxim was radicalized by H. Gollwitzer, who claimed that socialists *can be* Christians, while Christians *must be* socialists. See *Muss ein Christ Sozialist sein? Nachdenken über Helmut Gollwitzer*, eds. Brigitte Kahl and Jan Rehmann (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 1994).

more urgent. Barth regretted that the socialist movement had not been able to present an effective counterweight. Organized Social Democracy had turned from being a “revolutionary” force into one “national-bourgeois” party among others. Barth criticizes Karl Kautsky’s “external-mechanical” view that socialism would rise by itself from the catastrophes produced by capitalism. He thinks that “historical-materialism in the sense of Marx” does not assume fixed historical schemes but reckons with living persons who become free and autonomous. Like Marx and Engels, Barth presupposes a mutual effect (*Wechselwirkung*) between human consciousness and material conditions. Using a well-known phrase of Engels, Barth points to the importance of being prepared for the “leap from necessity into freedom.”³²

At the same time, Barth exhorts his fellow socialists to remember the importance of international solidarity. He stresses the need for inner personal steadfastness, besides organization, agitation, and practical action, while he insists on the revolutionary orientation of the socialist program towards a classless society. He has in mind a development that produces “better human beings” as well as “better conditions.”³³

Barth understands the war as a result of the old bourgeois social order, based on “competitive fight” and the “right of the strongest,” including the financial system: “[A]ll the thousands of Frenchmen who must now die, are dying not for their fatherland, but for the 40 billion francs that the French banks have [invested] in Russia.”³⁴ In the spring of 1917, he agrees with the statement of the Swiss Social Democratic party, which he had joined two years earlier: “War is a consequence of capitalism and the capitalist spirit of today’s society, therefore [it is] to be fought against by us.”³⁵

On the whole, Barth’s theological radicalization of socialism corresponds to the radicalization of his theology towards true knowledge of God.³⁶ The common basis is the idea that *the gospel and socialism bring something new from God to*

32 Karl Barth, “Die innere Zukunft der Sozialdemokratie,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 152–60, 153–54.

33 Karl Barth, “Was heißt: Sozialist sein?,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 161–63, 163.

34 Karl Barth, Sermon on August, 23, 1914, in *Predigten 1914*, eds. Ursula and Jochen Fähler, Gesamtausgabe I.5 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, ²1999), 430–42, 439, 435.

35 Karl Barth, “Sozialdemokratie und Militärwesen,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 354–81, 371.

36 Barth’s epistemology is analyzed with great conceptual precision by Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1985).

humanity, to which humanity shall respond. For Barth, the motivation of progressive human action is rooted in the movement of God, not in an idea or ideal.³⁷

2.2.2 Elaboration (1915–1917)

Over the next two years, Barth elaborates his position in front of ecclesial as well as proletarian audiences and tries to evoke in his listeners a better understanding of themselves and also of the other side. The overall message is straightforward: “Above all”, Barth says, “we have to acknowledge God again as God.”³⁸ His lectures in church contexts have a stronger (self-)critical tone, while his lectures in socialist contexts audiences often seek to invite his listeners to a better understanding of the gospel.

The lecture “Wartime and God’s Kingdom” from November 1915, held in front of an ecclesial audience, is an important document in the process of Barth’s turn to a more theocentric dialectical theology.³⁹ In the preceding summer, Switzerland had seen the first cases of conscientious objections to military service during World War I. Some Religious Socialist theologians defended the young men. The liberal-conservative theologian Paul Wernle (1872–1939) replied with a pamphlet that warned against an “over-refinement of subjective conscience” and a “hidden egoism.”⁴⁰ He regarded service to the fatherland as service to God.⁴¹ Barth’s lecture turned into an argument with Wernle, which he regretted soon afterwards, because he found that Wernle only repeated what “has been

37 Barth’s critique of idealism, including idealist socialism, is based on the insight “that an idea is not able to transform a human being.” Herbert Anzinger, *Glaube und kommunikative Praxis. Eine Studie zur “vordialektischen” Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1991), 116–17.

38 Karl Barth, “Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 225–45, 242.

39 See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 129–35; Georg Pfeleiderer, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich. Der Krieg als theologisches Ereignis bei Karl Barth,” in *Urkatastrophe. Die Erfahrung des Krieges 1914–1918 im Spiegel zeitgenössischer Theologie*, eds. Joachim Negel and Karl Pinggéra (Freiburg in Brisgau: Herder, 2016), 129–75, 163–65.

40 Eduard Thurneysen to Paul Wernle, November 17, 1915, in *Paul Wernle and Eduard Thurneysen. Briefwechsel 1909–1934*, ed. Thomas K. Kuhn (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 277–81, 279.

41 See Karl Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 177–210, 189, n. 29.

said endlessly since Luther,” and likewise the “pacifist reform ideas” offered nothing new.⁴²

Barth’s lecture contains important shifts, especially a sharper criticism of thinking in opposites. For example, he explains that mainstream ethics as well as state propaganda mobilize intellectually against other nations or groups, in this case against the anti-militarists. The mobilization is religiously legitimized by reference to “God.” For Barth, however, this appeal is not made to God but instead to a “force of nature detached from God.”⁴³

Similarly, socialism too is dependent on its opposite. The theory of class struggle intends a “thorough overhaul of bourgeois-idealist ethics” and to help abolishing social inequality. Yet the Social Democratic majority stands “on the ‘real’ ground of facts” in merely “formal opposition to bourgeois egoism” and thus remains “shackled” to its opponents. Prior to 1914, it had made a pact with the ruling “capitalist class,” in order to support an allegedly common national interest. For example, the “iron armor of the *Reich*” was regarded as necessary because its production created jobs (as one would say today). In this way, “class egoism” was simply replaced by “national egoism.”⁴⁴

According to Barth, the same is true for organized Christianity. He believes that “real knowledge of God”⁴⁵ occurs when a person quietly and sincerely listens to another voice within himself or herself. Yet he finds the churches generally to be content with the maxim “World is world,” whether it is understood in liberal or conservative terms. In contrast, Barth emphasizes that God is different from the world: “God is God, and with him and from him there comes something new.”⁴⁶ God, recognized in the life and word of Jesus, brings something fundamentally different from “everything else that seems true and right to me.”⁴⁷ Barth insists that God is not to be understood in light of any opposition (Schleiermacher would agree!), not even in opposition to the world, but in light of God’s own

42 Karl Barth to Willy Spoendlin, January 7, 1916, quoted in the editorial introduction, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 180.

43 Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 187. Barth did not reject *any* recourse to “religious experience” but doubted that any *particular* experience (historical or otherwise) can be legitimized as being “religious” by means of an appeal to God as its source. Some allegedly “religious” experiences, Barth cautioned, may come from a different source. This point is missed by Wolf-Friedrich Schäufele, “Der ‘Deutsche’ Gott. Kriegstheologie und deutscher Nationalismus,” in *Urkatastrophe*, 35–76, 73–74.

44 Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 188–89. Despite his clear-sighted analysis of Social Democracy, Barth here reduces the concept of “class egoism” to individual-psychological factors.

45 Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 191.

46 Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 193.

47 Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 201.

creative reality. To think “from God” means reflecting *God’s will in relation to the world and to humanity*. Hence, Barth opposes the division of God’s will into (1) a “pure will of love and peace,” allegedly expressed in some “lofty parts of the Gospel, in the finer morals of finer Christians, and especially in [the idea of] life after death understood as ‘silent eternity,’” and (2) “a harder, coarser will of God, a *deus absconditus*, which is recognizable in the reality of the world and its necessities.”⁴⁸

Three weeks later Barth considers the positive aspects of socialism more closely with a proletarian audience and states that his party comrades overlook “the deepest reason” and “deepest truth”⁴⁹ of their cause. The socialists are indeed doing the work of God, Barth says, but they can succeed only if they understand the basis of their activities.

He then offers an interesting apologetic explanation why his agnostic or skeptical listeners are capable of discovering God’s work in their own life. He begins with the assurance that the “question of God” is child’s play (*Kindereinfach*), like the question of whether there is truth above lies, justice above injustice, and peace above war. For Barth, these “self-evident facts” are as undeniable “as the air in which we live.” Truth, justice, and peace are communicative events, and the same applies to God. These things “are alive and make themselves known to us” as a “holy, sunny, majestic being” that enters into a relationship with people. What is decisive is not the right “name” of God, but an intuitive knowledge accessible to all people: God is “the immediate, for which we have, as it were, an instinctive longing.”⁵⁰

Barth gives two reasons for his thesis. Firstly, a restless conscience reminds human beings “that there is something else and that something must change.” The second reason is the example of Jesus: “There is no stronger proof of the reality of the kingdom of God than the life and death of Jesus. A human life that was completely under the power of God!”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Barth, “Kriegszeit und Gottesreich,” 199. Barth alludes to Wernle’s formulation of a “hard and coarse will of God,” found in natural law as well as in the Old Testament, which, although being “sub-evangelical,” is nevertheless God’s will (200, n. 46). Barth’s comments are archetypal for his later critique of the traditional Lutheran dialectic of Law and Gospel. See Matthias Gockel, “Barth, Luther und die Lutheraner. Anmerkungen zu einer spannungsvollen Beziehung,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 73 (2017): 358–80.

⁴⁹ Karl Barth, “Religion und Sozialismus,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 211–23, 222.

⁵⁰ Barth, “Religion und Sozialismus,” 215–6.

⁵¹ Barth, “Religion und Sozialismus,” 216–7.

Barth encourages his listeners to view their activities and convictions in the light of Jesus and God’s kingdom. He stresses that he himself wants to see “something of God’s kingdom coming to a breakthrough” (*Durchbruch*). He regards the political and economic aspirations associated with socialism, especially the idea of a new society based on fellowship and justice, as “revelation from God.”⁵² Personally, he has the same goal as “preacher of the gospel” and as “simple party soldier and confessor of socialism.”⁵³ His commitment to socialism is an integral part of his faith in God.⁵⁴

When Barth speaks to proletarian audiences, he considers *socialism in the light of the gospel*. In front of ecclesial audiences, he illuminates *the gospel in the light of socialism*. For example, at a YMCA holiday camp, Barth refers to socialism as the “ill-bred but more obedient brother”⁵⁵ through whom God addresses Christianity. Barth mentions, presumably to the approval of the audience, that the Christian side appears in a better light. “We have the deeper and more comprehensive knowledge, [...] the finer people, the greater ideas, the more beautiful success.”⁵⁶ Yet the self-satisfaction is immediately put into question, when Barth asks whether such achievements are relevant for the history of the kingdom of God. He explains that new forces became effective in *socialism* “with its prophets and apostles, with its doctrine of salvation, with its practical attempts to solve the great world riddle.”⁵⁷ Socialism offers a holistic approach to human misery and is ahead of Christianity:

There is an unconditional *Sachlichkeit* [...] that goes to the heart of the matter. There is a radical seriousness that comprehends the powers of evil as real powers of this world, there is a radical belief in the good and that it must become possible on earth. There is spirit that sighs and cries for a unified world, that wants to comprehend and penetrate matter.⁵⁸

52 Barth, “Religion und Sozialismus,” 218–9.

53 Barth, “Religion und Sozialismus,” 221.

54 This point is not recognized by Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 109. Jüngel says that, for Barth, theology is a “theory of praxis” (99, 114). In fact, the “theory” is God’s grace and the “praxis” is God’s commandment (Gospel and Law). Theology is a secondary reflection on both. Barth’s socialist practice is not the effect of his theological theory, as Jüngel suggests, but of “the Word of God, as heard and theologically thought through by Barth, which immediately reaches out to the whole [...] of social reality.” Eduard Thurneysen, “*Theologie und Sozialismus’ in den Briefen aus Karl Barths Frühzeit* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 31.

55 Karl Barth, “Die Zukunft des Christentums und der Sozialismus,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 390–407, 391.

56 Barth, “Die Zukunft,” 393, 395.

57 Barth, “Die Zukunft,” 395.

58 Barth, “Die Zukunft,” 399.

More than forty years later, Barth takes up this thought and remarks that the new openness of the Christian church for the world after World War II was made possible because Christians retrospectively began to discover and bring to awareness the “positive significance [...] of certain more or less purely *humanist*, a-Christian or even anti-Christian insurrections [*Schilderhebungen*] (especially of socialism!).”⁵⁹

2.3 Revolutionary Theology instead of Revolutionary Politics (1918–1921)

In his first *Romans* commentary, completed in December 1918, Barth places his theology on an eschatological foundation with astonishing dimensions, emphasizing the universal impact of God’s revelation in Christ. The Gospel as God’s saving power (Rom 1:16–17) aims at “the new international *people of God*, who now rally around the resurrection power as its cause. Everyone can and should be part of it. Faith has become the world question.”⁶⁰ The common bond of this international association is not a “new idea of God” but the “divine lifeworld [*Lebenswelt*], atmosphere, and possibility of existence;”⁶¹ in Christ, the effective power of the resurrection has really appeared on earth, and humanity can count on it.

Barth’s statements on political ethics continue to correlate radical Christianity and radical socialism. The guiding principle is Rom 12:21: “Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!” Barth reflects on the “divine world revolution”⁶² and asserts that the final victory over injustice comes through *God’s* justice, not through individual want or will. He recommends that Christians strengthen the forces of the good, without harboring illusions about “the power of evil” as precondition of any form of human order, including the state. Christianity “negates” this precondition, it aims at nothing less than “the unveiling of a new creation.”⁶³ For Barth, Christian participation in political life may occur only on the “most extreme left” and can be no more than “preliminary work for the final abolition of evil in a new world.”⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. IV/3.1 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1959), 31; *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 31 (rev.).

⁶⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21.

⁶¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 295.

⁶² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 507, see 516.

⁶³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 504–7.

⁶⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 508, 514.

In the second edition of *Romans*, the existing order is criticized even more sharply, while Barth continues to affirm the *relative* right of the revolutionary option. He claims that it is “little likely” that one “becomes a reactionary on the ground of the Letter to the Romans.” Still, revolutionary activity can become “titanism” and must be viewed critically because it stands so close to the “origin of truth.”⁶⁵

The question then arises as to *how* the new creation relates to existing social conditions and the reality of class struggle, which Barth calls “war in the midst of peace.”⁶⁶ In *Romans*, Barth does not give an answer, but in spring 1919 he delivers several lectures on the significance of recent developments in Russia. He finds a “promise”⁶⁷ in the revolutionary events and points out the “principal importance”⁶⁸ of the radical transformation that began in 1917. He regards the Soviet system at least as an impulse for Swiss democracy to come into better conformity with real life. At the same time, he warns against the construction of a new society by means of the old aeon, including the idea of “retaliation” and the use of (counter-)violence. For Barth, the strength of socialism consists in the seriousness of its “demands,” but he sees the danger of losing strength if one borrows the “methods of the opponents,” that is, the bourgeoisie. History sometimes calls for “leaps of violence,” and “concessions to human weakness” are possible, but the latter should not be made into a principle. Barth thus abstains from calling for a revolution in Switzerland and instead stresses the necessity of intensified socio-political reforms: “More cooperatives, more social education!”⁶⁹

Barth now is more open to the prophylactic strategy that he had rejected thirteen years earlier.⁷⁰ In July 1919, he addresses the more conservative part of

65 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi, Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 640.

66 Karl Barth, Sermon on March, 31, 1918, in *Predigten 1918*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe I.37 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2002), 123–33, 127. Here, Barth becomes very concrete in his description of the devastating impact of capitalism: “One person may say to the other: ‘You must work for me in the swirling dust, in poisonous fumes, in a deafening din, under whizzing wheels that can seize you at any moment, 10 hours, 12 hours, as many hours as I want to pay you, at day and night time, your whole life. I am sorry for you, but King Mammon wants it that way.’ And the other person must be silent and obey, for he too can do nothing but what Mammon wants. This is war in the midst of peace, countless graves tell its story.”

67 Karl Barth, “Bolschewismus,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 494–500, 495.

68 Karl Barth, “Demokratie oder Diktatur?,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 501–2, 501.

69 Barth, “Demokratie oder Diktatur?,” 501–2.

70 See above, 1.1.

the electorate in a newspaper article and argues that it would be wise to consider voting for moderate Social Democratic politicians, in order to accommodate socialism *within* the existing social-political order and to prevent the working class from becoming radicalized. An uncompromising stance would be imprudent, for “Bolshevism from the right only calls for Bolshevism from the left.”⁷¹

These reflections appear to be less radical than the demands of the Bolsheviks, but such an impression would rest on the “old” perspective. In fact, Barth finds Bolshevism not too radical but *not radical enough*. Evidently, he felt that his point was not easy to grasp, as an address to party comrades five weeks later demonstrates. He warns the Swiss Social Democrats against joining the III. (Communist) International, which was founded in March 1919: such a step would be “dangerous and confusing.” Instead, he recommends a different method: “Wait, watch and grow. Our harvest ripens all by itself.”⁷² From Christoph Blumhardt, Barth had learned that “prophetic” Christian engagement, be it Christian or socialist, implies two elements, waiting and hurrying; both complement each other.⁷³

Barth then mentions what could be said in favor of Bolshevism:

The Russian doctrine is plausible because it is radical. It proclaims the miracle, the unheard-of, the impossible, the whole. This gives it a scent of truth. The greatest memories are awakened when one reads the proclamations of Lenin and his friends. [...] ‘The old has passed away, behold, all has become new!’ – so, or almost so, it resounds from the East. A Philistine who would not listen to this message! Socialism goes all out, it is radical, or it is not socialism. [...] Shouldn’t Bolshevism be the real socialism, because it is so radical?⁷⁴

The question in the last sentence is meant rhetorically. Barth’s answer is negative, as the context shows: He does *not* think that Bolshevism is as radical as its supporters and its enemies alike assume.⁷⁵ What is important for Barth is a

71 Karl Barth, “Ein Wort an das Aargauische Bürgertum!,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 514–20, 518.

72 Karl Barth, “Das, was nicht geschehen soll,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 521–27, 522. Barth’s view here comes close to Kautsky’s (see above 1.2.1.), although he uses an image from biology and does not think in terms of historical-economic necessities.

73 See Karl Barth, “Vergangenheit und Zukunft,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 528–45, 545. Did a similar maxim, expressed differently, guide Lenin’s reflections on revolutionary strategies?

74 Barth, “Das, was nicht geschehen soll,” 523–24.

75 The failure to grasp this point leads to misrepresentations of Barth’s position. See, for example, Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation, 1905–1935* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 125–30. Some of Peterson’s judgments rest on a se-

“radicalism of forces” and not, as he perceives it to be the case in Russia, of “words, programs and undertakings.” The “real” revolutionary radicalism aims at “a reversal [*Umkehrung*] of the world, a reversal of humanity,”⁷⁶ which eventually is brought forth by God. Socialism testifies to God’s revolution through its radical protest and its “defiant No,” behind which there is the “most comprehensive [and] most vivid Yes,”⁷⁷ as Barth declares in front of a regional Socialist assembly. Correspondingly, he tells his congregation: “Pay attention, the Bible tells us, to the coming of the new world in the here and now!”⁷⁸ Barth’s theo-political vision puts revolutionary socialism on an eschatological basis and in this way ties radical social-political change to God’s action.

2.4 Summary

In order to understand the decade of Barth’s involvement in Swiss socialist politics, one must notice that he did not participate in the drafting of programs or official declarations. He rarely explained what socialism meant for political practice, and if he did, he dealt with local issues, such as the situation of the textile workers in Safenwil, where he was involved in the formation of local trade unions.

Nevertheless, Barth’s socialist involvement also concerned strategic or theoretical issues. During World War I he reproached Social Democratic parties for their support of the war effort, and in 1919 he opposed membership of the Swiss Social Democratic Party in the Communist International. In both cases, Barth appealed to the revolutionary-eschatological character of socialism. Even when he called socialism a “revelation” or a “word” of God to the churches,

lective or simply incorrect reading and a superficial understanding of historical context. In one instance, his translation turns the text into the exact opposite (232, n. 36): In 1931, Günther Dehn explained that he should not be counted among “the sloganeering agitators against ‘Marxism and pacifism’” (“[...] dass ich nicht etwa unter die schlagwortmäßigen Bekämpfer von ‘Marxismus und Pazifismus’ getreten bin”). Peterson’s translation, however, suggests that the sentence merely expresses opposition to Marxism and pacifism (“[...] that I have not gone under the normal battle slogans [sic!] of ‘Marxism and pacifism’”). See also the critical reviews by Georg Pfeleiderer, *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 144 (2019), 493–6, and Stephen J. Plant, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73 (2020), 365–67.

⁷⁶ Barth, “Das, was nicht geschehen soll,” 524–25. The word *Umkehrung* is reminiscent of *Umkehr*, which translates the Greek word *metanoia*.

⁷⁷ Karl Barth, “Vom Rechthaben und Unrechthaben,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 599–621, 619.

⁷⁸ Karl Barth, Sermon on December 29, 1918, in *Predigten 1918*, 265–71, 269.

he did not identify it with the gospel but rather understood it *in light of the gospel*. Thus, socialism is a “parable of the kingdom of God” and a critical word, in which “the problem of opposition to the existing order is given.”⁷⁹ It signifies God’s word of judgment over the (false) gods of the world and of humanity. In this light, it is not surprising that Barth, after his move to Germany in 1921, remained an outspoken critic of nationalism and militarism. While during the next decade he abstained from party politics, he continued to find his place on the left side of the political spectrum.⁸⁰

3 Theo-politics in the *Church Dogmatics*

We now turn to two sections in Barth’s doctrine of creation, which discuss extensively socialist theory and practice. In *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 46.3, Barth considers soul and body in critical conversation with (historical) materialism, and in *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 55.3, he discusses the class struggle.⁸¹

3.1 The Significance of Historical Materialism for Christian Anthropology

Barth’s anthropology emphasizes the unity and inner diversity of soul and body. The human being is both: “always and in every respect spiritual, always and in every respect corporeal.”⁸² Barth distances himself from abstract Patristic dualism and abstract monism, which he recognizes in two forms, monistic spiritualism and monistic materialism, including historical materialism.

Barth mentions Ernst Haeckel’s physiological understanding of the soul as entirely “natural phenomenon”⁸³ and adds that most scientists acknowledged the material conditions of the soul but did not postulate, as Haeckel did, a purely

⁷⁹ Karl Barth, “Der Christ in der Gesellschaft,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1914–1921*, 546–98, 592, see 589.

⁸⁰ See Herbert Anzinger, “Soziale Demokratie oder revolutionäre Diktatur? Zur politischen Position Karl Barths während des Ersten Weltkriegs und zu Beginn der Weimarer Republik,” in ... und über Barmen hinaus. *Studien zur Kirchlichen Zeitgeschichte (FS Carsten Nicolaisen)*, ed. Joachim Mehlhausen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 72–99, 98.

⁸¹ See Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus*, 314–18, 331–2.

⁸² Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. III/2 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1948), 446; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, trans. H. Knight et al. (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 372 (rev.).

⁸³ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 461; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 384–85.

material nature. In Barth’s view, monistic materialism did not have “the power of real science but rather that of a world view.” Its strength was based on “strong affects” connected to certain “historical-ethical-social facts,”⁸⁴ particularly the commonality of materialist perceptions of reality throughout history. The rationalization of human life since the 18th century led to a rapid commercialization, industrialization, and mechanization of life (for example, the development of railways and steam navigation, electric telegraphy, photography, the spread of factories, ironworks, and mines) as well as to a “way of life” (*Lebensform*), whose “primitive force” “had to speak and indeed spoke in favor of a materialist anthropology.”⁸⁵

At this point, historical materialism comes into play. Barth regards it as “entity with its own origin” and rejects the view of “older theological polemics”⁸⁶ that it is merely the morally questionable result of scientific materialism *à la* Haeckel. He mentions four characteristics:

(1) Historical materialism understands the history of humanity as history of economy, while the cultural, scientific, political, moral, and religious products of society are regarded as expression of economic power relations. (2) It implies a critique of history as history of class struggles, that is, struggles between the owners of land and other means of production and those who actually perform the “economically productive labor” and who, under modern capitalism, were almost always the “expropriated” and “exploited.”⁸⁷ (3) Historical materialism is a prediction about the future of history, in which there will be no more exploiters and exploited. Barth calls this prediction “the eschatology that Karl Marx bequeathed to his followers” and considers it to be the “driving motive of socialist action.”⁸⁸ Marx himself, however, made only few predictions about the future course of history. In fact, Barth’s comment may be related to his own eschatological view of socialism. (4) Historical materialism does not appeal to the privileged and prejudiced class of the bourgeoisie but to the working class; it calls for economic and political solidarity among the workers themselves.

Barth concludes with an exhortation to the churches, which often served as “most secure guarantee” of the existence of “a class order”, in which the “supremacy of the economically strong”⁸⁹ prevailed. Only a revision of anthropology from the vantage point of eschatology would provide a convincing answer to

84 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 463; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 386 (rev.).

85 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 463; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 386 (rev.).

86 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 464; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 387 (rev.).

87 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 465; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 388 (rev.).

88 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 465; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 388 (rev.).

89 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/2, 467; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 389 (rev.).

Marxist social thought. Instead of favoring the immortality of the soul, Christianity should publicly proclaim the resurrection of the dead and thereby testify that the gospel relates to the whole human being and material economic reality.

3.2 The Significance of Marxism for Christian Ethics

Barth's ethics of creation in *Church Dogmatics* III/4 has four sections: freedom in community, freedom for life, and freedom in limitation. The third section includes a thorough extensive discussion of human work.⁹⁰ In general, human work corresponds to God's providential care, in which the human being is addressed as God's creature. Providence and creation, however, are not the center but the context (*Umkreis*) of God's covenant with humanity in Jesus Christ. Similarly, human work is not the center of human life but belongs to its context. It is the "active affirmation of one's existence as human creature."⁹¹

Barth names five criteria of the Christian concept of work: objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*), dignity, humaneness, contemplativeness (*Besinnlichkeit*), and freedom. The third criterion is most relevant for the consideration of human work as *labor*, that is, as employment for the purpose of securing one's living, since, for Barth, here the gap between God's commandment and human practices is especially obvious: the existing reality in the world of human labor is "inhumane," it is a humanity "without and against fellow human beings."⁹² Barth mentions two aspects. Firstly, the modern labor process is characterized by mutual competition between the workers. It is "sinister" and "unpeaceful."⁹³ Instead of coordinating essential demands of life in a purposeful way, people look after their own advantage and strive for an abundance of the trivial. Secondly, the above mentioned "inhumane" reality has even "more impudent and disastrous" effects in organized labor. Here, Barth takes up his earlier insights into the asymmetry of the labor contract: the entrepreneurs have an advantage, he says, because they possess "the so-called means of production (land, raw materials, tools and machines, working capital)," while the workers must offer "their time and labor power [*Arbeitskraft*] and thus themselves,"⁹⁴ in order to survive. The labor proc-

⁹⁰ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. III/4 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1951), 592–648; *Church Dogmatics* III/4, trans. A.T. Mackay *et al.* (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 516–64. The German word "*Arbeit*" can be translated as "work" and "labor."

⁹¹ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 593; *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 518 (rev.).

⁹² Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 615; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 536 (rev.).

⁹³ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 618; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 538 (rev.).

⁹⁴ Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 621; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 541–42 (rev.).

ess, especially in the “Western world,” is based on the “principle of exploitation of some by others,” in which the profit accrues to the owners and allows them to “shape the labour contract according to *their* interest.”⁹⁵ One person turns another person and their labor into “the means of one’s own ends and into a mere instrument,” which is “inhumane and therefore an injustice.”⁹⁶

Barth mentions attempts to counter the system of exploitation, including various kinds of social security by the state and the organization of factories on a cooperative basis. Above all, he thinks of the “awakening” of the labor force to the consciousness of its own power, against the background of the fundamental analysis and critique of the capitalist system, “which has become particularly associated with the name of *Karl Marx*.”⁹⁷ Barth appreciates that several effective barriers were erected in time against the exploitation of the weak by the strong, but he doubts that state socialism in the East – the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China – will succeed to overcome the system of exploitation, despite the abolition of private ownership of the means of production. In line with his earlier texts, Barth considers the existing socialist states at the time (1951) to be not too radical but *not radical enough*.

What are the consequences for Christian ethics? According to Barth, God’s commandment is “in all circumstances categorically the summons to counter-movement and to humaneness.” He says that the Christian church understood much too late the challenge posed by the modern capitalist labor process and thus became “complicit in the injustice that characterized this process.”⁹⁸ Hence, it has no right to raise its voice against new forms of exploitation in state socialism, as long as it is not able “to comprehend the old form of capitalist exploitation as such, to assert God’s commandment against it [...], to keep to the ‘left’ of its representatives”⁹⁹ and to make the cause of those disadvantaged by this disorder its own cause.

According to Barth, the organization, purpose, and coordination of human labor is a task of society as a whole,¹⁰⁰ it must be oriented towards human dignity and not serve private economic interests but the needs of human life.¹⁰¹ Barth explains what this means politically in no uncertain terms in his treatise

95 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 622; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 542 (rev.).

96 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 623; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 543 (rev.).

97 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 624; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 543 (rev.).

98 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 624; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 544 (rev.).

99 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 625; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 544 (rev.).

100 See Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 611; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 532.

101 See Ulrich Dannemann, *Theologie und Politik im Denken Karl Barths* (Munich-Mainz: Grünewald-Kaiser, 1977), 206–7.

on church and state five years earlier: the Christian community, he says, should choose from five “socialist possibilities” – social-liberalism, corporative system, syndicalism, local currency, (moderate or radical) Marxism – the one possibility from which it may expect “the maximum degree of social justice.”¹⁰²

For Barth, the root of evil consists in a fundamental human “transgression” or “aberration” (*Verfehlung*).¹⁰³ The exploitation of human beings might be hindered and changed but not eliminated, not even by a countermovement with the best intentions. Here, the question arises whether Barth, contrary to his own Christocentric approach, views human history first in the perspective of sin rather than reconciliation. Still, his eschatological reservation does not lead to quietism but rather lends legitimacy to human fights for a more just world. The “decisive word” of the Christian community is “the proclamation of *God’s* revolution” against the “‘godlessness and unrighteousness of men’ (Rom 1:18).” The Christian community participates in this revolution in a humane way when it espouses “this and that form of social progress or even of socialism” with attention to the particularities of time, place, and situation.¹⁰⁴ Barth’s relativization of socialism and social progress aims at their relative justification.

Eight years later, in his elaboration on the “prophecy” of Jesus Christ, Barth describes the history of this prophecy as a history of battle (*Kampfgeschichte*).¹⁰⁵ Its origin and its goal – the pure light of peace and grace¹⁰⁶ – is certain, but it has not yet run its course. The gospel frees human beings to participate in this history by living in solidarity and fellowship with God, with the world, and with their neighbors, or rather: their fellow “comrades [*Genossen*] in the partnership of reconciliation.”¹⁰⁷ For Barth, the new human being is not a future hope or projection, as it appeared to be in his earlier writings,¹⁰⁸ but a living presence, according to John 14:19: “Because I live, you shall also live!” Barth is realistic enough to call this message an “attack,” in fact, the sharpest attack one can imagine, which the old human being seeks to avoid by claiming “‘This person

102 Karl Barth, *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1946), 27 (No. 17). The comment is important, since it shows that Barth – like Gollwitzer – regards socialism and Marxism primarily as a socio-economic and not a political system (see McMaken, *Our God Loves Justice*, 13).

103 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 625; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 545 (rev.).

104 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III/4, 626; *Church Dogmatics* III/2, 545 (rev.).

105 See Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/3.1, 271–301; *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, 237–61.

106 See Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/3.1, 272; *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, 237 (rev.).

107 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/3.1, 285; *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, 248 (rev.).

108 See above, 1.3.

is not I” and similar excuses, to which “the word of grace” replies: “Dare to be who you are.”¹⁰⁹

4 Conclusion: The Kingdom of God and Communism

Since 1906, Barth adopts socialist and Marxist terminology for the analysis and critique of capitalist inhumanity and insists that the organization of work as well as the production and distribution of goods should be undertaken by society as a whole and not by ‘the market.’ He ascribes to Marxism an eschatological motivation but does not regard it as a secular doctrine of salvation, and he shares with it the conviction that the humanistic ideas of freedom, equality, and brotherhood are to be realized not only in the political-legal but also in the social-economic sphere. The Christian church should stand up for an egalitarian society and the dismantling of material privileges. In a letter from 1967, Barth points to the “tacitly assumed” direction, which he wanted to emphasize in his theology: “ethics – fellow-humanity – a serving church – discipleship – socialism – peace movement – and in and with all these things, politics.”¹¹⁰

In their critique of Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx and Engels state that “communism is not a *state of things* [*Zustand*] which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement that supersedes [*aufhebt*] the present state of things.”¹¹¹ Analogously, for Barth, the kingdom of God is not an ideal, to which reality must orient itself, but a real revolutionary (and perhaps even communist) movement that supersedes the present order.

109 Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/3.1, 286–287; *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, 249–50.

110 Karl Barth to Eberhard Bethge, May 22, 1967, in *Briefe 1961–1968*, 404–5 (Letter 252).

111 Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie*, Marx-Engels-Werke, vol. 3 (Berlin/GDR: Dietz, 1983), 35. The (slightly different) English version is readily available online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm> (August 26, 2021).

V Faith and Resurrection

Hans-Christoph Askani

Das Wunder des Glaubens.

Zu Röm 3,21 – 4,8

Abstract: Romans 3:22–23 is, according to Luther, whom Barth quotes here, “the main part and the middle of this epistle and the whole of scripture”. The verses speak of the righteousness of God. There is a “Krise” (crisis) for the world and for humanity, but it is also a “crisis” for God. Only faith allows us to enter the sphere of this double crisis. We couldn’t do so alone. How could we grasp what is happening in God? But astonishingly – and that is the “miracle” Barth speaks of here – God tells us something about it. According to Paul’s surprising thought, which Barth interprets here, this communication is the “righteousness of God” and the “justification” of humanity.

1 Einleitung

Um in die folgenden Überlegungen einzuführen, möchte ich ein Wort Sören Kierkegaards zitieren, das Eduard Thurneysen als Motto seinem Buch über Dostojewskij vorangestellt hat.

Wenn das Experiment überhaupt Eindruck gemacht hat, so müßte es sein, wie wenn eines wilden Vogels Flügelschlag über dem Kopf der zahmen vom selben Geschlecht, die gesichert in der Zuverlässigkeit der Wirklichkeit leben, gehört wird und unwillkürlich auch sie mit den Flügeln schlagen läßt.¹

Warum dies Wort Kierkegaards zur Einleitung in einen Gedankengang, der einen Ausschnitt aus Karl Barths *Römerbrief* zu interpretieren unternimmt? Eine mögliche Antwort ist: weil hier drei Namen vereinigt sind, die die geistige Atmosphäre kennzeichnen, die für den *Römerbrief* Barths – dies so ungewöhnliche Buch – von so großer Bedeutung war: E. Thurneysen, der an der Entstehung des Buches, wie man weiß, nicht unbedeutenden Anteil hatte; S. Kierkegaard, dessen Denk- und Glaubensstil den jungen Barth geprägt haben; F. Dostojewskij, der in seinen Roman ein Bild der christlichen Existenz gezeichnet hat, das Barth mit Macht anzog. So kommt es nicht von ungefähr, daß auf den Seiten des Römerbrief-Kommentars,

1 Eduard Thurneysen, *Dostojewski* (München: Kaiser, ⁴1930), 2.

die uns hier beschäftigen (die Auslegung von Röm 3,21–4,8) unter den überhaupt wenigen erwähnten Denkern Kierkegaard und Dostojewskij herausragen.

Der tiefer liegende Grund für das anfängliche Zitat ist jedoch ein anderer, ein inhaltlicher. Kierkegaard spricht von einem „Experiment“. In der von Thurneysen für sein Buch ausgewählten Formulierung ist nicht ausgeführt, um welches Experiment es geht. Das Experiment in seiner ‚Anordnung‘ haben wir also nicht vor uns; aber die Konsequenzen, die daraus entstehen, werden durch ein Bild beschrieben. Welches Bild? Das Bild eines Vogels hoch in den Lüften. Stimmt das? Ja; aber das Entscheidende ist damit noch nicht gesagt. Das Entscheidende ist, wie dieser freie dort oben seine Kreise ziehende und mit den Flügeln schlagende Vogel auf die wirkt, die nicht oben in den Lüften ihre freien Kreise ziehen, sondern als gezähmte Vögel sich nahe dem Erdboden halten. Sie sehen diesen anderen Vogel nicht, aber sie hören das Schlagen seiner Flügel und sie können sich der Wirkung des Gehörten nicht entziehen. Als würde das, was sie dort oben hören, ihnen irgendwie gelten, entsteht eine Unruhe unter ihnen und in ihnen und sie beginnen ihrerseits mit den Flügeln zu schlagen.

2 Die Krise (κρίσις)

Das, was in Kierkegaards Bild angesprochen ist, wird von Barth in einer völligen anderen Terminologie aufgenommen in seiner mit dem Titel „Jesus“ überschriebenen Auslegung von Röm 3,21–36.

Zunächst 3,21–22a: *„Jetzt aber ist abgesehen vom Gesetz die Gerechtigkeit Gottes offenbart, die vom Gesetz und den Propheten bezeugt ist, nämlich die Gerechtigkeit Gottes durch seine Treue in Jesus Christus für alle, die glauben.“*² So übersetzt Barth diese Verse und beginnt dann mit der Interpretation der ersten zwei Worte: „Jetzt aber.“³

„Jetzt aber.“ Wir stehen vor einer umfassenden und unwiderstehlichen Aufhebung der Welt der Zeit, der Dinge und der Menschen, vor einer durchdringenden, aufs Letzte gehenden Krisis, vor einer Aufrollung alles Seins durch sein überlegenes Nicht-Sein.⁴

² Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 129 (NB: Die kursiv gesetzten Passagen wurden im Original in Fettdruck wiedergegeben).

³ Νυνὶ δὲ κτλ.

⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 129.

Die ‚Krisis‘ hat ihren Ursprung also in einer Begegnung, oder vielmehr, sie *ist* eine Begegnung, die Begegnung zwischen der Welt (in der der Mensch mit einbegriffen ist) und – was? Es ist überraschend, ja es ist geradezu schockierend, zu lesen, wie Barth fortfährt. Wir hätten wohl erwartet: ‚zwischen der Welt‘ („der Welt der Zeit“, wie Barth sagt) und ‚einer anderen Welt, einer höheren, überlegenen‘. Aber nein, Barth bringt einen nicht zu erwartenden Begriff ins Spiel, den er „der Welt“ bzw. (wie er hier sagt) dem „Sein“ gegenüberstellt: den eines „überlegene[n] Nicht-Sein[s]“.

Es geht also wirklich um eine Krise – im Sinn der „Krisis“, was letztlich heißt „Unterscheidung“ und „Scheidung“ – und nicht etwa um einen Übergang. Nicht nur um den Verweis auf eine andere Sphäre, etwa von der Immanenz auf die Transzendenz, oder von der menschlichen Welt auf die göttliche. Nein, die Krise besteht darin, daß das, was beanspruchte *alles* zu sein (und gar nicht anders konnte als dies beanspruchen⁵), daß das, was also beansprucht, alles zu sein, eben *nicht* alles ist. Das kann niemand von sich aus verstehen, das konnte niemand erahnen – bis zu dem Zeitpunkt eben, an dem die Krise eintritt. Erinnern wir uns des Bildes, das Kierkegaard uns vorgestellt hat: „[...] wie wenn eines wilden Vogels Flügelschlag über dem Kopf der zahmen vom selben Geschlecht, die gesichert in der Zuverlässigkeit der Wirklichkeit leben, gehört wird und unwillkürlich auch sie mit den Flügeln schlagen läßt“. Flüchtiger Lektüre kann es erscheinen, als würde die Erschütterung das friedliche alltägliche Leben der zahmen Vögel betreffen, zugunsten eines weniger routinierten, offeneren, vielleicht gefährlicheren, aber jedenfalls abenteuerlicheren. In Wahrheit ist aber durch Kierkegaard nicht die banale Alltäglichkeit angesprochen, als von des freien Vogels Flug in Frage gestellte und erschütterte, sondern *die Wirklichkeit* selbst, die uns – als Wirklichkeit – die Sicherheit und Routiniertheit vormacht, auf die wir uns verlassen können, weil, was die Wirklichkeit ist, ja so eindeutig wäre. In *diese* Wirklichkeit und ihren Begriff kommt die Erschütterung, ob ihre Evidenz nicht eine Illusion sei und ein allzu limitierter Bereich für einen freien Vogel – und für einen gezähmten vielleicht auch. Die Erscheinung des freien Vogels dort oben erinnert also an etwas anderes als an eine beschränkte Verschiebung der Koordinaten unseres Selbst- und Wirklichkeits-Verständnisses. Wie auch bei Barth die Krise nicht einen *Aspekt* der Wirklichkeit betrifft, sondern die ganze Wirklichkeit, die Wirklichkeit als solche mit ihrem Anspruch, die reale, die einzig wahre zu sein. „Wir stehen vor einer umfassenden und unwiderstehlichen Aufhebung der

5 Und dies trotz des Verweises der Welt über sich hinaus, denn dieser Verweis gehört immer noch zu ihr, er dient letztlich nur dazu, den Herrschaftskreis „der Welt“ zu erweitern.

Welt der Zeit, der Dinge und der Menschen, vor einer durchdringenden, aufs Letzte gehenden Krisis.“⁶

Die fundamentale Unterscheidung, die hier eingeführt wird, läßt an Platons „Höhlengleichnis“⁷ denken. In ihm führt Sokrates seinen Gesprächspartner Glaukon zu der Erkenntnis, daß die zeitliche, flüchtige Wirklichkeit, in der wir leben, und die wir stillschweigend in ihrer Evidenz und Gesicherheit voraussetzen, im Vergleich mit der wahren, ewigen Wirklichkeit nur ein Schatten ist, der uns über sie und über uns selber täuscht. In der Tat kann man in Platons Gleichnis auch einen Moment der Krisis ausmachen; sie findet da statt, wo die beiden Wirklichkeiten sich begegnen, wo einer der in der Höhle Gefangenen befreit wird und ins Sonnenlicht tritt, in dem er die wahre Wirklichkeit erkennt, dann aber, als er seine Mitgefangenen von dem, was er sah, überzeugen will, von ihnen barsch zurückgewiesen wird. Doch trotz dieser strukturellen Nähe geht es im Römerbrief um etwas anderes. Das, was der Wirklichkeit „der Welt“ (mit ihrem umfassenden Anspruch) gegenübergestellt wird, ist nicht wieder eine Welt (eine höhere, wahrere), sondern – und nun verstehen wir, warum Barth diesen so äußerst radikalen Begriff einführt: ihr „überlegenes Nichtsein“. Also nicht eine Überhöhung, sondern ein Wider-Spruch. Der denkbar fundamentalste Widerspruch. Es gibt jemand, der „der Welt“ in ihrem Anspruch *widerspricht*. Wer? Gott. Und so sehr im nachhinein zu verstehen ist, daß dem All-Anspruch der Welt überhaupt nur Gott widersprechen konnte und kann, so sehr war doch genau das nicht vorauszusehen. Dies, daß Gott *spricht*, ist nämlich selbst der Sinn und Inhalt und Anspruch dieses Widerspruchs. „Gott spricht.“⁸

Um die Implikationen dieser These, dieser Erkenntnis auszuloten, müssen wir einen Umweg machen.

3 Die „Todeslinie“

Um die Krisis, in die die Welt kommt, wo sie ihrem überlegenen Nicht-Sein gegenübergestellt wird, zu charakterisieren, führt Barth einen weiteren überraschenden Begriff ein: den der „Todeslinie.“⁹ Die Todeslinie meint hier nicht, was man vielleicht spontan unter ihr verstehen möchte: die Grenze, die dem menschlichen Leben gesetzt ist, und zwar nicht nur die, an der sein Leben einmal aufhören wird, sondern die, die er als das Ende seines Lebens vor sich hat, im

⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 129.

⁷ Platon, *Der Staat*, Buch VII.

⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 130.

⁹ Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 155, 167–168.

Sinne eines Seins zum Tode, welches seine ganze Existenz bestimmt. Diese zwischen dem Menschen und dem Menschen (als jetzt Lebendem und künftig einmal nicht mehr Lebendem) situierte Grenze, die einen Zeitpunkt bezeichnet, der zugleich unausweichlich und in seinem Eintreffen doch nicht vorauszusehen ist, ist hier nicht gemeint.

Was aber dann? Die Linie zwischen *Gott und Mensch*. Die Linie, die die Grenze des Menschen markiert, innerhalb derer er ist, was er ist: sich selber suchend, sich selber deutend, sich zu dem machend, was er sein will, soll und muß, die Grenze also, die die ganze Armut und den ganzen Reichtum, m.e.W. das ganze Sein des Menschen einfasst, diese Grenze soll nun „Todeslinie“ heißen – nicht weil jenseits dieses ganzen Seins (dieses Reichtums und dieser Armut, dieser Sehnsucht und dieser Erfüllung...) der Tod wäre, sondern, weil er *diesseits* dieser Linie ist. Wie das? Weil jenseits dieses ganzen sich selber verwirklichenden Seins – Gott ist.

„Ein anderes ist und bleibt das, was Gott ist und tut, ein anderes das Sein und Tun des Menschen.“¹⁰ Und eben dies „anders“ („ein anderes“): hie Gott, da Mensch, dies ist die Todeslinie. Der Mensch tut nicht, was Gott tut, er tut anderes. Er tut auf seine Weise; Gott aber auf die seinige. Das ist die entscheidende Linie. Diesseits ihrer ist der Mensch auf sich zurückgeworfen, weil er immer nur tut, was er tut (was er tun kann und will); jenseits dieser Linie – was ist aber da? Nur Gott. Nur dies, daß Gott *ist*. Daß Gott *Gott* ist. „*Jenseits* der Todeslinie ist Gott [...]“,¹¹ sagt Barth.

Das heißt zunächst eines: Nicht nur ein *Jenseits* der Todeslinie gibt es nur, weil Gott ist, sondern überhaupt die so gezogene *Todeslinie* gibt es nur darum; es gibt sie nur aufgrund Gottes! Sie ist nicht das dem Menschen vorherbestimmte Ende seines Lebens, sie ist der Unterschied zwischen dem Bereich Gottes und dem Bereich des Menschen, zwischen der Zuständigkeit Gottes und der Zuständigkeit des Menschen. Dies, daß Gott *ist*, daß Gott *Gott* ist,¹² heißt, daß dort, wo Gott *nicht* ist, das Diesseits der Todeslinie ist.

Unüberschreitbar ist zwischen hier und dort die Todeslinie gezogen – die Todeslinie, die freilich die Lebenslinie, das Ende, das der Anfang, das Nein, das das Ja ist. *Gott* erklärt, *Gott* spricht, *Gott* bezahlt, *Gottes* Wohlgefallen wählt und wertet.¹³

Der Bereich, der ganze Bereich, den der Mensch mit sich selber ausfüllt – und der ein mit Leben und mit Menschsein ausgefüllter Bereich ist bzw. wäre, ein Le-

¹⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 155.

¹¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 167.

¹² Die Reihenfolge der Sätze ist umkehrbar: Dies, daß Gott *Gott* ist; dies, daß Gott *ist*.

¹³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 155.

bensbereich also bis eben der Tod kommt, dieser ganze Bereich heißt der Bereich des „Todes“, wenn es Gott gibt. Nein, genauer: wenn Gott ist, wenn Gott *Gott* ist; nein, noch einmal genauer: wenn Gott sagt, daß er ist, wenn Gott *sagt*, daß er *Gott* ist. Dann ist in der Tat *alles* anders. Wie sollte es auch nicht, wenn Gott ist und wenn er sagt, daß er Gott ist?!

So kommt es nicht von ungefähr, daß Barth diesen Gedanken der Todeslinie einführt in Interpretation von Röm 3,28: „Denn wir rechnen, daß der Mensch gerecht erklärt wird durch Treue Gottes, abgesehen von den Werken des Gesetzes.“¹⁴ Barth nennt dies den „Standpunkt‘ Jesu“, den er dem Standpunkt der Religionen gegenüberstellt. Der Standpunkt der Religion vertritt die Überzeugung, daß vom Menschen nicht wirklich geredet wird, wenn nicht auch Gott mit einbezogen wird, das heißt, wenn nicht die Öffnung des Menschen auf Gott hin berücksichtigt wird. Der Mensch ist nur wahrer Mensch in seiner Beziehung zu Gott. Der ‚Standpunkt‘ Jesu ist der, daß *Gott ist*. Merkwürdige Redeweise: „der Standpunkt Jesu“ – als würde Jesus einen Standpunkt vertreten. Aber genau das tut er, wenn auch auf unerwartete Weise: er vertritt einen Punkt, auf dem er steht. Was ist dieser Standpunkt? Er ist – anders, als für einen Standpunkt zu erwarten – gerade nicht seiner. Er ist nur der, daß Gott ist. Er ist also letztlich der Standpunkt Gottes, der darin besteht, daß Gott ist. Diesen Standpunkt vertritt Jesus. Anders gesagt (in traditioneller Redeweise): dieser Standpunkt, der Standpunkt Gottes selber offenbart sich in Jesus. Der Standpunkt Gottes und der Standpunkt Jesu hängen also zusammen. Wie? So, daß Gott in Jesus sagt, daß er Gott ist.

Daran hängt alles. Denn ohne das Sagen könnte Gott so lange Gott sein, wie er will, es würde immer nur den Standpunkt der Religionen, das heißt den Standpunkt des Menschen geben. Darum die unableitbare, unüberbietbare Wichtigkeit, aber auch die unintegrierbare Widerständigkeit des Satzes, mit dem wir den I. Abschnitt über die Krisis abschlossen im Bewusstsein, ihn nicht auszuschöpfen. „Gott spricht.“¹⁵ Auch jetzt schöpfen wir den Satz nicht aus. Er ist nie ausgeschöpft, wird nie ausgeschöpft sein. Aber jetzt ahnen wir, daß sich an ihm alles entscheidet. Daß er also die eigentliche Krise ist, von der wir sagten, sie sei eine Beziehung.

Barth formuliert diesen Satz, der aus nur zwei Wörtern besteht, in Erläuterung von Röm 3,21–22a: „Jetzt aber ist abgesehen vom Gesetz die Gerechtigkeit Gottes offenbart.“¹⁶ Die „Gerechtigkeit Gottes“ heißt zunächst und heißt auch zuletzt gar

14 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 154.

15 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 130.

16 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 129, vgl. 130.

nichts anderes, als daß Gott Gott ist. Das aber wird nur wahr, wenn Gott *spricht*. Und das wiederum hat überhaupt nur Bedeutung, wenn *Gott* es ist, der spricht.

Was spricht aber denn Gott – und was bedeutet denn die ganze Gerechtigkeit Gottes? „Gott spricht, daß er *ist*, der er ist.“¹⁷ In der französischen Übersetzung heißt es: „Dieu dit qu’il *est* celui qui est.“¹⁸ Damit ist das Entscheidende gerade nicht gesagt. Gott behauptet nicht sein Sein. Er identifiziert sich nicht mit dem Sein, sondern mit sich selber. – Mit sich selber, als Gott gegenüber dem Menschen. Das aber tut er, indem er spricht. Indem er spricht, ist er der Gott, der er ist. Und von diesem Punkt, diesem einzigen und entscheidenden Punkt hängt nun alles ab. Darum auch kann es heißen, daß „jetzt die Gerechtigkeit Gottes offenbart ist“. Denn die Gerechtigkeit Gottes ist nichts anderes als sein Sein im Verhältnis zum Menschen.

4 Eine neue „Rechnungs‘weise“

Wenn dies aber geschieht, das heißt, wenn Gott sich offenbart, dann fängt, wie Barth sagt, eine ganz neue „Rechnungs‘weise“ zwischen Gott und den Menschen an.¹⁹

Der Mensch kann zusammenrechnen, so viel er will. Was er zusammenrechnet, wird immer sein, was er tat und tut, was er ist und aus sich macht. Das ist nicht Gottes Weise zu rechnen. Gottes Weise zu rechnen ist, daß er gar nicht rechnet, sondern – Gott ist. Das ist nicht vorgesehen, das ist nicht zu erwarten. Freilich, nicht daß ein Gott ist, ist nicht vorgesehen. Im Gegenteil, das ist ja gerade vorgesehen. Die meisten Religionen – und selbst die meisten Atheismen – führen es uns vor. Was *nicht* vorgesehen ist, ist, daß Gott so Gott ist, wie nur er ist.

Das ist der Grund, warum der Begriff der δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (*Gerechtigkeit Gottes*) eingeführt wird und eingeführt werden muss. – Nicht in erster Linie (das ist nur eine Implikation oder eine Konsequenz), um die Bedeutung der menschlichen Werke, wo der Mensch es mit Gott zu tun bekommt, zu relativieren, sondern um Gott zu denken oder genauer zu *glauben* so wie er ist – und nicht so wie der Mensch ihn sich konzipiert.

Gott muß sagen, wie er Gott ist. Und er sagt es auch. Wie aber? *Indem er bestimmt, was gerecht ist*. Seine Gerechtigkeit ist sein Gottsein, und sein Gottsein ist seine Gerechtigkeit.

¹⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 130.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, traduit de l’allemand par Pierre Jundt (Genève : Labor et Fides ²2016), 92.

¹⁹ Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 154.

Genau das sagt Barth in einer überaus erstaunlichen Formulierung, in der er die zwei folgenden Sätze unmittelbar nebeneinander stellt. Den ersten: ein Zitat aus dem 21. Vers des 3. Kapitels des Römerbriefs;²⁰ den zweiten: seine eigene Deutung: „Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes.‘ [Erster Satz] Gott spricht, daß er *ist*, der er ist. [Zweiter Satz].“²¹ Es gehören also drei Elemente zusammen und keines darf fehlen, sonst bricht alles zusammen: Gottes Sein, Gottes Gerechtigkeit, Gottes Sprechen. Alle drei zusammen genommen bedeuten: Nur Gott kann bestimmen, wer Gott ist. Daß *er* es bestimmt, ist seine Gerechtigkeit. Die muß er aussprechen, sonst weiß niemand von ihr – und von ihm. Nur wenn der Mensch weiß, was Gottes Gerechtigkeit ist, weiß er, wer Gott ist. Das aber heißt: nur wenn Gott ihm *sagt*, was seine (Gottes) Gerechtigkeit ist.

Der Mensch von sich aus kann also nie zu Gott kommen. Sonst wäre Gottes Gerechtigkeit nicht seine Gerechtigkeit und dann wäre Gott nicht Gott. – Darum auch ist die sogenannte Rechtfertigungslehre nicht *eine* mögliche Ausdrucksform der Gottesbeziehung zu den Menschen (eine Ausdrucksform unter anderen). Nein, sie läßt sich nicht ersetzen, nicht einmal ergänzen. Nicht nur wo an ihr etwas abgeschwächt oder abgemildert wird (der Mensch kann doch wenigstens ein ganz klein wenig etwas beitragen!...), sondern auch wo sie in umfassendere Zusammenhänge eingeordnet und dadurch relativiert wird, wird Gott sein Gottsein streitig gemacht. Das Entscheidende ist also nicht, wie viel der Mensch zu seinem Heil beiträgt (oder ob er vielleicht gar nichts dazu beitragen kann), das Entscheidende ist vielmehr, daß wo in dieser Weise vom ‚Beitragen‘ (sei es positiv, sei es ablehnend) geredet wird, von Gott noch gar nicht geredet wird. Nicht Gott übt auf seine ganz spezifische (etwa rein gnädige) Weise seine Gerechtigkeit aus, sondern daß er seine Gerechtigkeit ausübt, macht ihn zu Gott, ist sein Gottsein.

Das läßt sich schön zeigen in Barths Auslegung von Röm 4,1–2: „*Was sollen wir nun sagen von Abraham, unserem Vorfahren aus dem Fleische? Wenn Abraham auf Grund seiner Werke gerecht erklärt wurde, dann gereicht ihm doch das zu Ruhm! Ja, aber nicht vor Gott!*“.²² Diese vier letzten Worte sind die entscheidenden Worte, weil sie das Sein des Menschen im Verhältnis zu Gott ansprechen. – Und darum geht überhaupt alles: *vor Gott oder nicht vor Gott*. Darum wiederholt auch Barth in seiner Interpretation diesen Satz noch einmal in hervorgehobener Weise: „[...] *aber nicht vor Gott*.“²³ Es ist, als wäre die Frage des Ruhms und der Werke nur dazu da, diese andere frei zu legen. „Natürlich gereicht Abraham das zum Ruhm! Es

²⁰ Grammatikalisch gesehen ist es gar kein Satz, sondern nur ein Bruchstück eines Satzes; aber hier hat es die Funktion eines Satzes.

²¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 130.

²² Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 163.

²³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 165.

gereicht ihm zum Ruhm durch alle Generationen hindurch bis heute.‘ – Aber darum geht es doch überhaupt nicht; worum es geht, ist, daß er *vor Gott ist*.

Nach menschlichen Maßstäben müßte alles daran hängen, daß der Mensch gerecht ist (oder wird), nach dem göttlichen Maßstab hängt alles daran, daß die göttliche Gerechtigkeit überhaupt ins Spiel kommt, weil in ihr Gott selber ins Spiel kommt. Darum auch hängt – erstaunlich zu sagen – für den Menschen das Entscheidende, das Letzte und Höchste – das Menschliche! – nicht daran, daß *er* gerecht sei, sondern daß *Gott* gerecht sei.

5 Die unmögliche Möglichkeit

Wie aber kann der Mensch sich vor Gott bringen? Er kann es gar nicht.

Wir haben zu Anfang ein Zitat Kierkegaards gebracht. Es sprach von den gezähmten Vögeln, die „gesichert in der Zuverlässigkeit der Wirklichkeit leben“. Ein freier Vogel, dessen Flügelschlag über ihnen zu hören ist, weckt in ihnen ihre eigene vergessene *Unruhe*. Ist es nicht die Unruhe, daß die Wirklichkeit vielleicht gar nicht den Anspruch vertreten darf, die ganze, die einzige Wirklichkeit zu sein. Jene Wirklichkeit, die uns – durch sich selber – so imponiert. Was aber gibt es denn, was sich dieser Wirklichkeit entgegenstellen kann? Wir haben versucht, es zu verdeutlichen in dem wir hinwiesen auf einen anderen Anspruch; er bestand in Gottes Gerechtigkeit, die letztlich Gottes Gottsein ist. Von sich aus kann der Mensch dorthin nicht kommen. Immer wird er an der „Todeslinie“ auflaufen, das heißt daran, daß er bei sich selber bleibt.

„Immer ist Gott dem Menschen jenseitig, neu, fern, fremd, überlegen, nie in seinem Bereich, nie in seinem Besitz, immer sagt Wunder, wer *Gott* sagt“, schreibt Barth. Ist aber damit das letzte Wort gesagt?

Immer ist Gott dem Menschen jenseitig, neu, fern, fremd, überlegen, nie in seinem Bereich, nie in seinem Besitz [...]“ und wenig später fährt er fort: „Sofern es menschlicherseits zu einem Bejahen und Verstehen Gottes kommt, sofern das seelische Geschehen die Richtung auf Gott, die Bestimmtheit von Gott her empfängt, die Form des Glaubens annimmt, geschieht das Unmögliche, das *Wunder*, das Paradox.“²⁴

Wir kommen hier in Gebiete der Theologie, in denen die Luft immer dünner wird, und die theologische Wahrheit immer profilierter: Glauben ist für den Menschen keine Möglichkeit. Glauben ist die Unmöglichkeit, in die Gott den Menschen hineinnimmt, indem er ihn dort sein läßt, wo er von sich aus nicht sein kann: „vor

²⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 167; 168, Hervorhebung von mir.

Gott“. Darum auch kann Barth sagen: „Glaube ist selbst Treue Gottes [...].“²⁵ Als würde das Hauptgewicht des Glaubens Gott übernehmen. – Und so ist es auch.

„Glaube ist die Umkehrung, die radikale Neuorientierung des nackt vor Gott stehenden, des zum Erwerb der einen kostbaren Perle arm gewordenen, des um Jesu willen auch seine Seele verlierenden Menschen.“²⁶

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 138.

26 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 138.

Pierre Manent

Réflexions de philosophie pratique sur la «foi seule»

Abstract: Karl Barth develops a radical critical discourse which almost never confronts the practical life of the believer, in particular regarding concrete obedience to a concrete authority. «Faith» itself arises from «thinking» which, identified primarily with ethical action and penance, takes place in the immanence of life in time. If penance merges with the crisis which itself merges with the human condition, isn't Karl Barth's radicalism ultimately of a philosophical order? Can faith survive the unlimited critique of religion?

Le titre de cet exposé renvoie à un chapitre d'un essai publié récemment, chapitre dans lequel je m'interroge sur le sens pratique, sur le sens pour l'homme agissant, du recours des réformateurs à la «foi seule», et où je conclus, à tort ou à raison, que les réformateurs, pour liquider sans reste la médiation ecclésiale, tendent à ruiner la compréhension classique de la vie pratique, entendant par «classique» ici à la fois la compréhension grecque, spécialement aristotélienne, et la compréhension chrétienne telle qu'elle avait été élaborée par les pères et les docteurs, ou, pour faire bref, la compréhension catholique.¹ Cette question restera à l'arrière-plan de la présente contribution, dont le propos sera plus modeste. Je n'ai de Karl Barth qu'une mince connaissance, et si j'ai accepté avec joie et gratitude l'invitation qui m'a été adressée, c'est afin de ne pas manquer cette occasion de m'instruire auprès de spécialistes compétents sur un auteur qui m'impressionne, mais à l'égard duquel je suis incapable de parvenir à un jugement clair et stable. Je proposerai donc quelques remarques, plus interrogatives que critiques, élaborées à la lecture lente et difficile du *Römerbrief* de 1922.

Une remarque générale d'abord. Sous la forme d'un commentaire de l'*Épître aux Romains*, Karl Barth développe un discours qui n'est pas théologique, puisqu'il ne porte pas directement sur les choses divines ou humano-divines telles que visées et définies par les dogmes chrétiens, et qu'il ne se propose pas directement d'engager son lecteur sur la voie du devenir-chrétien. En même temps, il ne peut faire que son discours ne tire quelque autorité de l'autorité

¹ Voir Pierre Manent, *La Loi naturelle et les droits de l'homme* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2018), 41–47.

théologique de Paul, comme il ne peut faire que son discours n'induisse des effets pratiques, positifs ou négatifs, sur les opinions, dispositions et actions de certains au moins de ses lecteurs. En lui-même et par lui-même, son discours réclame d'être qualifié de *critique*, non seulement aux divers sens ordinaires et généraux du terme, non seulement à cause de la vigueur et même de la véhémence avec lesquelles il s'en prend à certaines institutions ou idées ainsi qu'à certains auteurs ou figures, mais aussi en raison du motif explicite et de la teneur constante de son propos qui consistent à détruire tous les repères sur lesquels nous pourrions nous orienter avec quelque assurance. Procédant ainsi, il ne conduit pas une démarche personnelle destinée à faire place nette pour sa doctrine personnelle, mais il entend en somme proposer une image, un analogue, un symbole, un *Gleichnis*, de la vie nouvelle en Christ qui est à ses yeux essentiellement *Kritik – Kritik* de la vie ancienne, ou du vieil homme, en tous ses aspects.² Cette *Kritik* a bien du pouvoir puisqu'elle rend le péché tout bonnement impossible : comment pourrions-nous continuer de vivre dans le péché quand nous sommes aussi radicalement acculés et mis en question ?³ Bien sûr Karl Barth n'ignore pas que l'homme, tout homme, est nécessairement pécheur et, comme tel, incapable de ne pas pécher. Comme il l'écrit : en ce monde, il n'y a pas d'autre homme précisément que le vieil homme. Comment comprendre l'usage très déroutant que notre auteur fait du couple possible-impossible ? Il faut dire emphatiquement que les termes n'ont pas ici leur sens naturel ou usuel, que « possible » et « impossible » ici ne qualifient pas l'action concrète d'un agent déterminé. Il s'agit pour Barth, à l'aide de ces catégories logiques absolument générales, de caractériser les deux grandes conditions de la vie humaine, et de les mettre en rapport en même temps qu'on souligne leur entière absence de rapport, ou de les lier paradoxalement par leur exclusion réciproque. Karl Barth peut alors écrire : «[...] cette possibilité impossible qu'est la grâce exclut la possibilité possible du péché [...]»⁴ ou encore : «[...] je ne peux considérer le péché comme une possibilité à côté de la grâce, mais seulement comme la possibilité (*la* possibilité humaine !) qui, par l'impossibilité de la grâce, devient elle-même impossibilité».⁵ Quant à la manière de se rapporter à ces deux conditions, voici la formule la plus synthétique : «Je ne peux pas être pécheur et gracié [*Begnadigter*]. Je peux seulement me tenir dans la *conversio* [*Umkehr*]

² Voir Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, éd. Cornelius van der Kooi et Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 259–96 (à propos de Rm 6,1–14).

³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 262–63 (à propos de Rm 6,2) et suivantes.

⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 271 (traduction française ici et dans la suite par l'auteur).

⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 290.

(dans l'irréversible conversion !) *du péché à la grâce*». ⁶ On ne sait trop que faire de cette proposition dans la mesure où cette conversion est un *mouvement* qui ne semble pas s'achever ou s'accomplir dans une disposition stable, une «vertu» de la personne. Karl Barth en tout cas n'annonce ni ne promet rien de cette sorte.

Nous lisons pourtant une section intitulée *Die Kraft des Gehorsams* (à propos de Rm 6,12–23), ce qui suggère qu'on considère ici une puissance de transformation qui ne saurait être sans conséquence concrète et pratique. Or voici les premières lignes de cette section:

La grâce est la puissance de l'obéissance. Elle est *la* théorie qui comme telle est aussi praxis, *le* comprendre qui comme tel est aussi un prendre. Elle est *l'*indicatif qui a la signification de l'impératif pur et simple, de l'impératif catégorique. Et elle est *l'*impératif, *l'*appel, *le* commandement, *l'*exigence à laquelle on ne peut pas *ne pas* obéir, et qui a la force d'une simple constatation. Elle est *le* savoir qui a le vouloir qui lui correspond non comme une chose autre, seconde, additionnelle à *côté* de soi mais immédiatement *en* soi.⁷

C'est peu de dire que la représentation de notre dispositif psychique est ici bouleversée. Karl Barth prend à cœur de confondre, d'identifier ce qu'une longue élaboration s'était efforcée de distinguer, à savoir l'entendement et la volonté, l'indicatif et l'impératif. L'égalité et la symétrie à l'intérieur de ces couples de notions ne sont cependant qu'apparentes, car la distribution des accents confirme que, dans la perspective de Barth, la théorie domine ou enveloppe la praxis. Ou plus précisément, si la théorie domine ou enveloppe la praxis, c'est pour prendre en vue autre chose que la praxis, ou l'action au sens usuel du terme. La théorie ne prend pas en vue l'*agendum* mais, nous avons d'entrée souligné l'importance de la notion, elle prend en vue l'*impossible*. Karl Barth aurait sans doute quelque indulgence pour la perplexité que j'avoue ici puisqu'il semble considérer que cette disposition à prendre en vue l'impossible réclame un effort ou un art particulier. En tout cas il annonce confusion et désordre pour

celui qui, à la différence de Paul et des réformateurs, ne sait voir même la «grâce» que sous le point de vue de la loi, même Dieu que sous le point de vue de la morale et de la religion humaines, de l'agir ou du non-agir humains, celui qui n'est pas à même de considérer calmement et fermement la catégorie de l'impossible qui auprès de Dieu est possible [...].⁸

Quoique cette heureuse disposition devant l'impossible soit spécialement attribuée à Paul et aux réformateurs, on ne saurait méconnaître l'extrême généralité

⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 285.

⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 287.

⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 297.

de ces dernières formules, qui désignent une posture théorique devant une catégorie logique ou ontologique. Il semble très abstrait, sinon très artificiel, de dire que la foi du chrétien prend en vue la *catégorie* de l'impossible, ou d'ailleurs quelque autre «catégorie» que ce soit. La foi prend en vue «quelque chose» que l'incroyant dira volontiers impossible, mais le mouvement intérieur de la foi vise calmement et fermement ce qui ne lui apparaît précisément ni comme possible ni comme impossible mais comme *la réalité* suprême. Osera-t-on rappeler que Paul décrit le rapport de la foi à son objet en de tout autres termes : «scandale pour les Juifs» et «folie pour les païens», le Messie crucifié est pour ceux qui sont appelés, Juifs ou Grecs, non pas l'impossible possible mais «puissance de Dieu et sagesse de Dieu» (1 Co 1,23–24).

La «théorisation», ou la transcription sur une portée théorique de la grâce et de la foi, semble confirmée un peu plus loin :

La grâce est la conscience de soi de l'homme nouveau. La grâce est la question de notre existence qui trouve réponse. C'est seulement quand cette compréhension [...] est absolument libre de toute confusion possible avec la question de savoir ce que nous pouvons et devons faire ou ne pas faire, que l'on peut parler adéquatement de la grâce et du péché.⁹

Il faut relever la condition mise par Barth à la compréhension de la grâce et du péché. Notre conscience de soi ne parvient à la netteté, la question de notre existence ne trouve réponse que si nous ne la mêlons pas à celle de savoir ce que nous pouvons et devons faire ou ne pas faire. Karl Barth tient à abaisser la vie pratique, en tout cas la portée ou l'importance du plan de la vie pratique, à souligner que les choses décisives se passent à un niveau qui est indépendant du plan de la vie pratique et supérieur à lui. Même s'il se traduit par une posture emphatiquement «théorique», ce niveau n'est pas non plus à proprement parler théorique, en tout cas il ne relève pas de la *theoria* du philosophe. Ce niveau est *existentiell*. On ne sait trop comment comprendre ce terme tellement chargé de la *Stimmung* d'une époque maintenant lointaine. Que veut dire Karl Barth lorsqu'il s'adresse ainsi à l'homme sous la grâce et la foi: «Vous n'êtes pas existentiellement en mesure de dire oui au péché » ?¹⁰

Nous avons peine à cerner le sens ou le visage de cette «obéissance» qui fournit pourtant le titre de cette section et dont Karl Barth souligne la «puissance». Ne pas être existentiellement en mesure de dire oui au péché, est-ce cela qu'on appelle «obéir à la grâce» ? Et dire oui au péché, serait-ce «obéir au péché» ? En vérité Barth évite le plus souvent, dans le corps de la section, le

⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 298.

¹⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 299.

terme qui en fait le titre. Au lieu de *Gehorsam*, il parle plus volontiers de *Sklave-Sein* ou de *Knechtschaft*. Ces expressions ne sont pas seulement plus concrètes et plus énergiques que la simple obéissance, elles désignent autre chose. Tandis que l'obéissance désigne une *action*, la *Knechtschaft* désigne plutôt une *condition*. Or, c'est en recourant à cette dernière notion que Karl Barth décrit de la manière la plus claire dans cet ouvrage ce qui, dans une autre tradition philosophique et théologique que j'ai mentionnée au début de cet exposé, serait appelé le moment du choix réfléchi ou de l'acte libre. Pour lui, dans la condition où nous sommes placés entre la grâce et le péché, il ne s'agit pas de choisir entre le bien et le mal, en vérité il ne s'agit pas de choisir. Grâce ou péché, il s'agit d'une «relation existentielle», d'un «être-esclave» pouvant se produire sous deux formes qui s'excluent réciproquement et qui excluent tout «état intermédiaire», deux formes qui ne peuvent être présentes l'une à l'autre que dans «l'instant invisible [*unanschaulichen Augenblick*]» où nous passons des mains de l'un des Maîtres dans celles de l'autre.¹¹ L'analyse classique de l'acte libre ressemble à cette description dans la mesure où elle aussi écarte la liberté d'indifférence : ou l'on est dans une bonne disposition, donc une disposition à la bonne action, ou l'on est dans une mauvaise disposition, donc une disposition à la mauvaise action, on ne peut être en tout cas dans une indifférence qui nous laisse également libres de choisir l'une ou l'autre. De la même façon, Karl Barth récuse à plusieurs reprises l'image vénérable d'Hercule à la croisée des chemins. Cependant, l'analyse classique, si elle relève la force des dispositions naturelles ou acquises (vertus ou vices), ne fait pas de la bonne ou de la mauvaise action l'effet d'un esclavage, alors que Karl Barth tient à souligner que grâce et péché sont également une *Knechtschaft* au sens le plus strict du terme.

Regardons les choses d'un peu plus près. Pour la conception classique, la direction pratique, vers le bien ou vers le mal, est normalement accompagnée de son opposée vers laquelle l'agent conserve toujours une certaine flexibilité. Aussi stables que soient les dispositions pratiques, naturelles ou formées par la grâce, la vie pratique est toujours une aventure avec ses aléas, et cela vaut aussi pour la vie spirituelle au sens strict du terme, qui est en son fond, elle aussi, une vie *pratique*. On a toujours des yeux pour *l'autre* possibilité, des yeux pour le bien même quand on a pris l'habitude du mal, des yeux pour le mal même quand on suit ordinairement de bonnes dispositions. Une velléité de bien, une

¹¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 299, à propos de Rm 6,16: «Dass es sich beim Sündigen wie beim Begnadigtsein um ein existentielles Verhältnis [...] handelt und dass darum eines das andere und beide einen Mittelzustand ausschließen, dass beide nur in dem unanschaulichen Augenblick, da wir [...] aus der Hand des einen Herrn in die des andern übergehen, nebeneinander stehen können, das ist hier einzusehen».

tentation du mal, peuvent toujours accompagner la disposition opposée. Il semble que Karl Barth ne veuille rien savoir, ou rien retenir, de ces aspects de l'opération pratique. Il en réduit en tout cas drastiquement la portée puisqu'à ses yeux le pécheur ne saurait voir dans la grâce que l'impossible, de même que le sujet de la grâce ne saurait voir dans le péché que l'impossible. Dans l'une ou l'autre condition, pécheur ou sujet de la grâce, nous ne voyons l'autre condition que sous la catégorie de l'impossible. Pour le dire naïvement, cette thèse semble difficilement compatible avec certaines expériences familières et universelles, comme celle de la tentation. Qu'est-ce qu'être tenté en effet, sinon être attaqué par la *possibilité* du péché ?

Ainsi l'intitulé de cette section – *Die Kraft des Gehorsams* – est-il quelque peu trompeur puisqu'il n'y a guère de place dans la conception de Karl Barth pour l'obéissance proprement dite. Cette notion en effet est active. Que l'agent obéisse à la loi ou à la grâce, son obéissance est une action. Or, dans la condition de *Knechtschaft*, le plus que l'on pourrait dire, c'est que l'obéissance a toujours déjà eu lieu, et que dès lors en effet, comme action elle reste invisible, *unanschaulich*. Esclave de la grâce ou du péché, je n'obéis à proprement parler jamais, je me trouve simplement dans l'une ou dans l'autre condition. Au reste, la parfaite symétrie entre les deux conditions, tellement soulignée par Karl Barth, ne me paraît pas impliquée par le texte de l'*Épître aux Romains*. L'expression «esclaves de la justice», précise Paul, n'est employée par lui que par égard pour la faiblesse des destinataires (Rm 6,18).

Une dernière remarque confirmera que Karl Barth n'a pas de place pour une compréhension active de l'obéissance. Alors que notre obéissance ou désobéissance semblent former une partie considérable de notre expérience de la grâce et du péché, cette *Gnadenerlebnis* est regardée par Karl Barth avec une distance qui confine au dédain. Précisément parce que nous sommes dans l'élément de la grâce et de la foi, cette expérience ne peut être à ses yeux l'objet d'un *schauen* mais seulement d'un *glauben*. Celui que Barth appelle l'apôtre et qu'il distingue rigoureusement du *Religionsmann*, celui-là, sans prétendre accéder à la connaissance d'expériences de la grâce, ose *croire* qu'il y a des hommes qui ont la grâce. Quant à l'homme religieux qui parle avec assurance de ces expériences, les siennes ou celles des autres, l'«*anschauliche Gnadenerlebnis*» qu'il invoque appartient à la «*menschlich-anschauliche Gestalt*» de la religion.¹² Ce que Barth tient à écarter par-dessus tout, c'est la moindre suggestion d'une continuité entre la face humaine et la face divine de l'expérience de la grâce, ou plutôt, ce qu'il s'efforce infatigablement de faire ressortir, c'est la solution de continuité, la

12 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 302 et 303 (italique par l'auteur).

rupture dans le tissu de l'expérience humaine qu'introduit la grâce quand elle est reçue dans l'authenticité de son *Unanschaulichkeit*.¹³ On est impressionné par l'intransigeance de Barth, mais on peut se demander si, avec la polarité *anschaulich-unanschaulich*, Barth ne procède pas d'une manière inutilement brutale. Je ferai ici un rapprochement impertinent. Dans la *Somme Théologique*, Thomas d'Aquin souligne lui aussi que la distance et la disproportion entre Dieu et l'homme affectent de manière essentielle l'expérience que fait de Dieu une âme qui a la grâce : sa présence ou son absence ne peut être connue avec certitude. Thomas emprunte à Denys une formule audacieuse qui me semble très éclairante : avoir la grâce, c'est «être joint à un inconnu». ¹⁴ En suivant la suggestion de Thomas, on dira : aussi inconnaissable ou invisible [*unanschaulich*] que soit la grâce, nous pouvons apprendre à vivre avec cet inconnu qu'est Dieu. Apprendre à vivre ainsi, n'est-ce pas d'ailleurs la seule connaissance réelle que nous en puissions avoir, une connaissance qui n'a rien de «mystique», qui ne nous donne ni le désir ni le sentiment d'échapper à notre condition, et qui ne lèse pas la transcendance de Dieu ? Une telle connaissance pratique n'est-elle pas la plus désirable et salutaire de toutes, ou plutôt la seule désirable, la seule salutaire ? Ce sont des questions que l'on pourrait poser.

Si cette dernière suggestion a quelque mérite, on sera conduit à juger que la «pente» de Barth contre la *Gnadenerlebnis* et en général contre la «religion» au sens courant du terme est inséparable du statut fort médiocre qu'il accorde à la vie pratique et donc, symétriquement, du statut au contraire fort exalté qu'il attribue sinon à la vie théorique au sens grec du terme, du moins au *Denken*. C'est si vrai que, pour lui, l'action elle-même, en tout cas l'action la plus digne d'intérêt et d'estime, l'action éthique première [*das primäre ethische Handeln*], celle qui permet la victoire sur l'homme [*die Überwindung des Menschen*] pour faire briller la gloire de Dieu – *Soli Deo gloria* – cette action est en fait un *Denken*. Elle consiste concrètement en la repentance : «L'action éthique première est un *Denken* tout à fait déterminé. La repentance signifie une *conversion* de la pensée [*Um-Denken*]». ¹⁵ Que la repentance présente pour la vie chrétienne un caractère premier, la proposition n'a rien pour nous surprendre. La repentance se confond avec le ressort même, l'impulsion inaugurale du christianisme et de la vie chrétienne. C'est ainsi que Jean-Baptiste précède et pour ainsi dire introduit le Christ, c'est ainsi que le premier appel de celui-ci est un appel à la pénitence : «repentez-vous et croyez à la Bonne Nouvelle» (Mc 1,15). Mais pourquoi et

¹³ Voir le début de la section *Der Sinn der Religion* (à propos de Rm 7,7–13), in Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 330.

¹⁴ *Somme Théologique*, Ia, Q. 12, art. 13.

¹⁵ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 589.

comment faire de la repentance un *Denken*, en tout cas un *Um-Denken* ? Il est vrai que, dans le passage que Karl Barth commente, Paul fait usage du terme grec de *nous*. Mais Barth choisit d'accentuer à l'extrême cette indication et de souligner emphatiquement ce choix : *Jawohl, das Denken !* La repentance est donc un *Denken* tout à fait déterminé, un *Um-Denken*, qui comporte de se tourner ou retourner [*Drehung*] vers la « nouvelle action » de l'homme nouveau. Après avoir répété que ce *Denken* reste nécessairement dans la sphère du relatif et ne saurait par lui-même justifier le croyant, Karl Barth avance une proposition plus risquée : il existe un *Denkakt* qui, en se déployant, inclut son propre dépassement jusqu'à discerner quelle est la volonté de Dieu. Lisons avec attention les lignes suivantes :

En effet, grâce, résurrection, pardon, *éternité*, il existe un penser de cette pensée. Il coïncide avec cette affirmation de la problématique la plus profonde de notre existence dans le temps. Quand, dans la *question* du sens de cette vie, nous reconnaissons son sens ultime, son sens définitivement *ultime*, alors, en proie à l'ébranlement le plus profond, nous pensons la pensée éternité [...*dann denken wir in tiefster Erschütterung den Gedanken Ewigkeit*]. C'est pourquoi la plus profonde problématique de notre existence est en même temps sa plus profonde vérité. Le penser de cette pensée est la pensée *renouvelée*, c'est le *Um-Denken*, c'est la repentance.¹⁶

Il est difficile au lecteur de garder sa liberté de jugement face à cet enchaînement d'identités ou d'identifications paradoxales qui dédaignent de se justifier. Que la pensée du *Dasein* dans le temps, que la *question* du sens de cette vie constitue son sens même, son sens ultime, cette proposition nous fait entendre une tonalité que l'on retrouve chez d'autres penseurs importants de ces années-là, et que peut-être d'ailleurs Karl Barth fut un des premiers à faire retentir avec autant de tranchant et d'éclat. En tout cas, cette compréhension de notre condition, non, cette *Bejahung* de notre condition se déroule nécessairement *diesseits*, elle se déroule dans l'immanence et se présente comme une affirmation de l'immanence : l'opération décisive de l'*Um-Denken* se déroule tout entière dans l'élément du *Denken* et de la vie exposée au temps.

On ne voit pas comment « la crise [*Krisis*] dans le penser de toutes les autres pensées » produirait par elle-même un dépassement, voire une abolition de soi, qui donnerait accès ou livrerait passage à l'éternité ou à la « pensée *pure* de Dieu *même* ». ¹⁷ Je soulignais plus haut que la « pensée de l'impossible » tendait à priver de toute signification spirituelle authentique le sentiment de la possibilité du péché, soit l'expérience de la tentation. Ici la *repentance*, identifiée à la

¹⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 589–90.

¹⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 590.

critique de toutes les pensées et à la crise même qui se confond avec la condition humaine, se situe à un niveau de profondeur ou de radicalité qui abandonne le repentir de l'agent à la vulgarité d'une expérience psychologique dépourvue de portée spirituelle authentique. À ce niveau de radicalité critique, il est impossible de porter son attention sur la conduite concrète de cet agent déterminé et concret qu'est le «pénitent» avec sa physionomie jadis familière. Je n'examinerai pas si, les apparences pouvant être trompeuses, il ne serait pas finalement plus facile de procéder à la critique de «toutes nos pensées» plutôt qu'à la repentance pour quelques-unes de nos actions.

Je ne méconnais pas la pertinence ou la valeur d'une pensée rigoureuse et audacieuse de la critique et de la crise, d'une affirmation de la problématique de l'existence dans le temps, d'une vie qui se confondrait, ou s'efforcerait de se confondre ou de coïncider avec la *question* du sens de la vie. On me pardonnera si j'ajoute seulement qu'une telle vie, c'est en somme la vie *philosophique* identifiée à son ressort critique, mais une vie philosophique qui ne se satisfait pas de la pure critique à la lumière de l'idée, mais se prend elle-même pour thème dans une affirmation synthétique ultime qui s'enracine plus profondément que la vie théorique et la vie pratique, et que Karl Barth, je l'ai déjà mentionné, désigne par le qualificatif *existentiell*. Ainsi, alors que Karl Barth a pour thème et souci constants de ne jamais perdre de vue la séparation, la distance et l'abîme entre ce qui est de l'homme et ce qui est de Dieu, certains de ses développements les plus stratégiques donnent le sentiment que la transcendance se trouve ou surgit au terme de l'affirmation la plus intransigeante et rigoureuse de l'immanence, l'éternité au terme de la critique et de la crise de tout ce qui est temporel, ou du moins, pour employer un terme chargé de résonances scolastiques, qu'il y a une convenance toute particulière entre l'affirmation sans réserve de la crise du *Dasein* dans le temps et la rencontre de la promesse de Dieu.

Je n'entends pas conclure conventionnellement que la paradoxologie de Barth se retourne contre elle-même, et qu'au terme d'une accentuation effrénée de la transcendance qui veut affranchir la grâce de toute possibilité d'accueil dans l'expérience humaine, on se trouve emporté dans une affirmation également effrénée de l'immanence humaine sous la forme de la critique et de la crise. Je voudrais plutôt souligner le fait que la critique de Barth, j'y faisais à l'instant allusion, s'exerce selon un rythme et dans une tonalité qui mettent constamment au premier plan l'assurance et l'intransigeance du *philosophie*.

La critique constante de la «religion», celle de l'expérience humaine ordinaire, celle de la vie pratique que la «religion» couronne et écrase, cette critique faite au nom d'une foi que rien d'humain ne doit entacher, cette critique s'exerce par une négativité qui relève à mes yeux davantage du mépris philosophique que

de la sévérité chrétienne. Mais la foi, dira-t-on, mais la foi ! Lisons seulement ceci : «Même la foi, dans la mesure où elle veut être, en quelque sens que ce soit, plus qu'un vide [*Hohlraum*], cette foi est incrédulité [*Unglaube*]». ¹⁸ La foi selon Barth tend à n'être que pure négativité, «vide» donc, ou saut dans l'incertain : «Pour cette raison la foi n'est jamais achevée, jamais donnée, jamais assurée, elle est, d'un point de vue psychologique, toujours et toujours à nouveau le saut dans l'incertain, dans l'obscur, dans le vide [*in die leere Luft*]». ¹⁹ Je ne sais pas s'il y a place dans la doctrine de Barth pour un point de vue psychologique. En tout cas, si une telle qualification de la foi est évidemment incompatible avec l'analyse catholique de la vertu de foi, elle me semble aussi, s'il m'est permis d'en juger, difficilement conciliable avec la conception luthérienne où la *fides* est inséparable de la *fiducia*. Il m'est en tout cas impossible de comprendre comment la foi en Christ, la foi dans les promesses du Christ, de quelque façon qu'on la décrive plus précisément, pourrait apparaître, «psychologiquement» ou autrement, comme «saut dans l'incertain, dans l'obscur, dans le vide», ou inversement comment la foi entendue comme «vide» pourrait être désignée ou reconnue en même temps comme foi en Christ.

Si la proposition chrétienne comporte nécessairement une critique de la loi juive, elle comporte tout aussi nécessairement une critique de la philosophie grecque, ou de la philosophie en général, cette «critique» étant plus ou moins destructrice ou préservatrice selon la diversité des confessions ou écoles de pensée chrétiennes. Il est d'autant plus difficile d'imaginer une critique barthienne de la philosophie que, je viens de le souligner, le ressort critique de sa pensée comporte fort visiblement les attributs de l'intransigeance philosophique. La seule mention quelque peu élaborée de la philosophie dans le *Römerbrief* indique ceci :

À l'ouverture salutaire de nos yeux pourvoient la souffrance et, se rattachant immédiatement à la donnée limite [*Grenzdatum*] de la souffrance, ce qui dans son essence est une interprétation de cette donnée, à savoir la philosophie lorsqu'elle est digne de son nom. Ainsi, ignorants de Dieu et de son royaume, connaissant le soupir de toute créature, nous nous accordons avec toute réflexion honnêtement profane, mais non pas avec les demi-mesures d'une réflexion théologique sur la nature et l'histoire. ²⁰

Il semble bien que, positive ou négative, la philosophie ne soit jamais pour Karl Barth une possibilité *rivale* de la révélation. Elle n'appelle donc pas une critique

¹⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 86.

¹⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 138.

²⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 436.

spécifique. Ou bien Karl Barth accompagne ou prolonge sa radicalité critique, ou bien il lui accorde sa sympathie pour son «honnêteté». On est tenté de dire que, dans une certaine mesure, la philosophie est la seule chose qui échappe à la critique de Karl Barth, aussi radicale soit cette dernière.

J'ai souligné d'entrée les limites de ma connaissance de l'œuvre de Karl Barth. Cet exposé vous a fait toucher du doigt ces limites plus souvent qu'il n'aurait été souhaitable. Je ne peux cependant me dérober à l'obligation de conclure, obligation qui n'est pas seulement rhétorique. J'ai déjà dit l'essentiel en considérant la question de l'obéissance. Pour ainsi dire à aucun moment de la lecture de ce texte majestueux, je n'ai rencontré le moment de l'obéissance concrète à une autorité concrète, une autorité qui donne sens et contenu à l'obéissance, et à la vie réglée par cette obéissance. Un esprit de première force et un écrivain virtuose mettent sous nos yeux la «dialectique dévorante du temps et de l'éternité»,²¹ dialectique qui nous laisse dans ce double esclavage du péché ou de la grâce où nous n'avons en vue que le paradoxe de l'impossible devenant possible, dialectique où nous ne pouvons puiser aucun motif d'agir effectivement, dialectique qui se maintient indéfiniment dans un «penser» qui n'agit ni ne contemple. Alors, en même temps que je suis subjugué et parfois comme écrasé par la parole impérieuse et débordante de Karl Barth, je me demande quel crédit je dois accorder à cette parole qui s'alimente et se consume dans la critique de toute expérience possible du Christ révélé et promis.

21 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 705 («gefäßige [...] Dialektik von Zeit und Ewigkeit»).

Brandon K. Watson

Faith as Imperceptible Reality: Barth's Understanding of Faith During the *Römerbrief* Period

Abstract: The focus of this essay is Barth's relentless critique of an individualized faith as seen during his *Römerbrief* period. His unwillingness to talk of faith only on epistemological grounds reveals the seeming ambiguity and dialectical nuance of his position. Developing a psychologized, conscious faith was rejected by Barth in favor of an objectively conceived reality of faith. It will be argued that faith's perception can be understood as an imperceptible reality based in God's ontologically objective being. To investigate and support this claim, how Barth understands faith in both editions of his *Römerbrief* will be analyzed. The essay concludes by reflecting on the current relevance of Barth's understanding.

1 Introduction

Karl Barth's lifelong attempt at alleviating any form of psychologizing the Christian faith is no secret. It is not that Barth sought some form of anti-intellectualism, quite the opposite. Human control and manipulation of the content of the Christian faith was understood by Barth to be one way 18th and 19th century philosophy and theology failed to provide an objective lens through which to engage cultural affairs, thus succumbing to being "pious spoke(s)men of the powers that be."¹ Moreover, adhering to a form of Christian faith that takes up residence in human consciousness wreaks havoc on the human's inability to evade an individualized religion and a religious individualization.² The understanding of faith

1 Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

2 Bruce McCormack claims the common thread uniting the four main loci of Barth's attention in *Romans I* is individualism. Barth's response was "fundamentally anti-bourgeois [...] in stressing that God and the knowledge of God are never the secure possession of human beings, Barth was at the same time attacking a religion which had assimilated itself to the needs of idealistically construed cultural development; a religion which prided itself on being the animating principle for that development. He was attacking a religion which provided bourgeois culture with perhaps its most crucial ideological support." *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 141.

as perceptive, that is, a form of human rationality capable of perceiving the world, God, and neighbor, seemingly conflated the subject-object distinctions for Barth. His aim was thus to remove such human perceptive capabilities as they relate to faith and throw faith back into the objective, yet concrete reality of God; salvation is a liberation from subjective individualization. Faith, understood in this way, would not only perceive, but could only perceive and be perceived in that it is itself imperceptible. In other words, faith does not belong solely on the epistemological plane; it also has an ontologically objective component. Barth's focus was not on espousing a phenomenology of faith, but a realistically construed ontology of faith, giving rise to an objectively conceived reality of faith found outside of human consciousness.

With these brief introductory remarks in mind, the essay seeks to read Barth's *Römerbrief* while reevaluating his understanding of faith. Barth's specific attempt to remove the reality of faith from perceptible, psychological, or even conscious reality is the focus of this essay. Barth's fundamental claim can be stated up front: "The salvation experience is that which happened on Golgotha."³ Faith is located, for Barth, objectively within God so that it is not able to be affected by human manipulation and control. The objective becomes subjective in history while maintaining a distinctiveness such that the objective being of God in Christ is not conditioned by nor originating from historical circumstances.⁴ Human attempts at mastery, control, and deception of the faithfulness of God does not influence the objective reality in which faith is grounded; faith is not the subject and object. Therefore, the faith which one "has" is never a possession.⁵ The essay will proceed in the following way. First, the essay investigates central chapters of *Romans I* revealing faith's objectively conceived form and content. *Romans II* is then taken up as a way to see how Barth deepened his

3 Karl Barth, "Gespräche mit Methodistenpredigern (1961)," in *Gespräche 1959–1962*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Gesamtausgabe IV.2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1995), 176. All translations of German sources throughout the essay are my own.

4 Such a claim is consistent in both editions of *Der Römerbrief*: "In both phases (*Romans I* and *Romans II*) the basic intention is the same: to speak of a presence of God (revelation, the Kingdom of God, the new humanity, etc.) in history in such a way as to make it clear that these realities are not of history." McCormack, *Critically Realistic*, 209.

5 The understanding of *Haben* and the *Erlebnis* of salvation was a critical point of contention between Barth and Pietism in *Romans I* and *Romans II* to which Pietists responded. Cf. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten* (München: Kaiser, 1978), 98–102; 195–99. Regarding the continuing influence of Pietism in Germany after World War II, see Eberhard Busch, "Der Pietismus in Deutschland seit 1945," in *Die Geschichte des Pietismus*, Bd. 3, *Der Pietismus im neunzehnten und zwanzigsten Jahrhundert*, ed. Ulrich Gäbler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 533–62.

understanding of faith a few years thereafter while presenting an unwavering commitment to removing faith from the realm of human consciousness.⁶ Barth's engagement with Pietism provides contextual and historical support for a systematic analysis of how Barth conceives the imperceptibility of faith in his *Römerbrief* period (1909–1922).⁷ In conclusion, this essay will consider how Barth's understanding of faith as a unity found in the objective reality of God can be useful for contemporary theological reflection, particularly given the current rampant individualism evident in Christianity. An argument running throughout this essay is that, during this time, faith for Barth, while not a personal possession, finds unity and primary reality in the promise and faithfulness of God.⁸

2 Faith, Pietism, and Religious Individualism: *Der Römerbrief* 1919

The attempt to avoid and defend against any form of psychologism or religious philosophical foundations for theology did not appear for the first time when Barth was writing *Romans* I between the years 1916–1918.⁹ Barth's reading of

6 Herbert Anzinger articulates Barth's understanding of faith during this time in its relation to consciousness: "Faith is not taken up in human consciousness but affirms the oneness of the conscious within the domain of God." *Glaube und kommunikativ Praxis. Eine Studie zur 'vordialektischen' Theologie Karl Barths* (München: Kaiser, 1991), 183. McCormack claims, despite earlier attempts at placing Barth within the liberal tradition, Barth "would do everything in his power to safeguard the distinction between an objectively real Self-revealing God and human consciousness." *Critically Realistic*, 135.

7 The periodization indicates Barth's inevitable dependence on his theological forebears during his student years in Germany. The years prior to Barth's "break" with liberalism in 1915 are important background material for understanding how he developed between the years 1916–1921, when his focus turned heavily towards *Romans*. Cf. Christophe Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians: Wilhelm Herrmann, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), 85–105.

8 Cf. Christophe Chalamet, "Divine and Human Faithfulness as a Key Theme of Barth's Theological Revolution," *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 32/1 (2016): 14–38.

9 Such as evidenced in Barth's 1910 lecture "Glaube und Geschichte." In this essay, we find very interesting claims by Barth, such that he understands faith as a process (*Glaubensvorgang*) not bound to active-passive behaviors in temporally structured time as contained in its relation to reality. "Glaube und Geschichte," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, eds. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt, Gesamtausgabe IV.22 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 148–212. See also Nelly and Karl Barth's letter from July 27, 1916 where they exhort to have found a treasure chest of knowledge in the 19th century Pietist J.T. Beck, in *Barth-Thurneysen Briefwechsel, Band I: 1913–1921*, ed. Eduard Thurneysen, Gesamtausgabe V.3 (Zürich: Theolo-

Paul was predicated on his pastoral and contextual experience, learning to preach the new world coming in Christ; the realism and universalism proclaimed despite all human virtues and failures.¹⁰ At the forefront of *Romans I*, is Barth's interrogation of three main ideological movements which contradict the message of the kingdom of God: individualism, positive church-ism, and idealistic moralism.¹¹ Where we see faith come to full expression in both editions is chapter 4, but it cannot be taken in isolation from the rest given the whole is contained in the particular and the particular contained in the whole. In other words, we are trying not to seize Barth's theology "by the top layer," as Robert Jenson warned, because, as one can readily see in much of post-barthian interpretation, the interpreter "finds Barth to be a slippery customer."¹² Evidence of the centrality of faithfulness is found in Barth's translation in Romans 1:16 of πίστις as faithfulness (*Treue*), which was defended by Rudolf Liechtenhan against Paul Wernle's critique.¹³ Needless to say, the concept of faith plays a critical role throughout the entire work, whereby Barth lays repeated emphasis on affirming God's faithfulness.¹⁴ However, it will be sufficient here in this limited space to explore how Barth understands faith throughout Romans 3–5.

Chapter 3 is titled: "The Justification of God" and the subtitle for verses 1–20 is "The Faithfulness" (*Die Treue*), which can easily summarize Barth's entire

gischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 148. A little over a year thereafter, Barth was stuck in his exegesis of Romans 5:12–21 and recommends Beck's *Erklärung des Briefes Pauli an die Römer* to Thurneysen. Karl Barth to Eduard Thurneysen, 9 September 1917, *Barth–Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, 228–9. For Barth's relation with the person and work of Beck, see Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten*, 39–44; Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf* (München: Kaiser, 1978), 13–15; 109–22; and Eberhard Jüngel, "Einführung in Leben und Werk Karl Barths," in *Barth-Studien*, Ökumenische Theologie 9 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982), 23–28.

¹⁰ Cf. Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 108.

¹¹ Barth's explication of Romans 4 is organized in part around these three forms as they indicate a proclamation of a rich man's gospel. Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 125. For an overview of these criticisms, especially their political and contextual underpinnings, see Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation 1905–1935*, BHTh 184 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 62–69; 141–83.

¹² Robert W. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1963), 20, n. 6.

¹³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 18, see note 12 for a reprinting of a letter from Rudolf Liechtenhan to Barth and references for Paul Wernle's critique of Barth's *Entdeckerfreude* in his review printed in *Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz* in 1919. Cf. Chalameat, "Divine and Human Faithfulness," 24–30.

¹⁴ Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 100.

focus of the chapter.¹⁵ Barth's aim, what he intends to show in his exegesis, is that "the *possibility* of revelation, on which the justification of humanity is dependent, became the *reality* of revelation through the justification of God in Christ and in faith."¹⁶ Barth's target in such a statement is the Idealists (particularly Friedrich Schiller). The Idealists, and those following in their footsteps, would rather the possibility always remain an abstract possibility divorced from reality. Such an idealistic notion rests on the law, which is simply the foreground for justification veiling the countenance of God.¹⁷ For Barth, however, justification in Christ and by faith is determined by the possibility of revelation actually being a historical reality, an event which took place in historical time and space. The historical reality of faith is not only located in human existential knowledge, but in God's historical being, in God's self-faithfulness *in history*. The absurdity (*Unsinn*) of history is only perceptible because history's meaning (*Sinn*) is already available in God and faith found in the "propagating" of the breakthrough of the new into the old.¹⁸ The thought-world of Idealism, from Plato to the Fathers of Socialism, says Barth, *only* unfolds under the presupposition of the war of God against the world (*Krieg Gottes gegen die Welt*).¹⁹ The location where God's faithfulness, the completed and finished objective turn, and human faith encounter one another forming a closed circle, is in Jesus Christ.²⁰ Faith is thus primarily seen throughout chapter 3 as self-contained in the self-faithfulness of God revealed in the historical person of Jesus Christ and only secondarily is faith then the first human act of liberation and freedom, predicated on, yet distinct from, the presupposition of the *Veni Creator Spiritus*.

The introductory paragraph to chapter 4 is peppered with dialectical nuance and indicates a retrospective and progressive bent of God's relationship to history, where God enters into the phenomenal (*Erscheinung*) without being a historical event, entering into appearance as a power breaking through what *was* and

15 Cf. Matthias Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124–33.

16 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 67. Barth goes on to claim that the "sogenannte Geschichte der notwendige Durchgangspunkt der eigentlichen Geschichte [ist]." We see the same emphasis placed on Abraham's history and contemporary history in chapter 4 of *Romans II*.

17 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 75–76 and McCormack, *Critically Realistic*, 165–72.

18 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 86–8. The entire claim of Romans 1:18–3:20, according to Barth, is to speak of the standpoint of presupposed faithfulness of God, which is not found in an abstracted history, but *within* the same historical framework.

19 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 90–91.

20 The relationship of the Christian to faith is an *Erkenntnis* of the fulfillment objectively completed. Cf. the notes Barth wrote in the handwritten exemplar in *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 91, n. 24.

will be.²¹ The previous explication is now given historical weight placed within the narrative of Abraham in Genesis, which is at the same time an inclusion in God's meta-narrative relation with humanity. Barth upholds a distinction of particularity because each temporal relation is marked by particular circumstances and experiences; yet, all are included, bound up, into God's historical narrative. To hear the voices of history speaking from Abraham through Paul is to recognize oneself as standing next to Abraham: "Our way is his way, his way is our way. There has never been another."²² Neither Abraham's psychological makeup nor his external circumstances made any difference in God's narrative faithfulness.²³ What matters is *only* the faithfulness of God: "We are only empty vessels and when, and *only* when, we recognize ourselves as empty vessels, God speaks."²⁴ God's word is the content of the promise and ontological ground of Abraham's faith where "God's creative power stands behind both."²⁵ God is then both the subject and object of faith. The faithfulness of God declares faith just, seeks and finds human faith, and liberates the human individual from isolation and brings one into the promise, into the communal relation with God and one's fellow human.²⁶

21 The opening sentence indicates Barth's intention in how he is interpreting the *Unmittelbarkeit* of the relation of God to Abraham and Abraham to God, where he repeats the opening line of his comments on Romans 3:9–18: "Der Sinn der Geschichte ist Gottes Sinn." *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 75; 106. Another variation indicates the otherness of God's relation: "Gott [ist] Gott und der Sinn der Geschichte sein Sinn." (71). On Barth's early understanding of the eschatological and phenomenal, see Martin Westerholm, *The Ordering of the Christian Mind: Karl Barth and Theological Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 67–80.

22 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 108, my emphasis. Cf. Karl Barth, *Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2010), 98–9; 132–3. In the 1918 foreword, Barth writes: "Paulus hat als Sohn seiner Zeit zu seinen Zeitgenossen geredet. Aber *viel* wichtiger als diese Wahrheit ist die andere, daß er als Prophet und Apostel des Gottesreiches zu allen Menschen aller Zeiten reden. Die Unterschiede von einst und jetzt, dort und hier, wollen beachtet sein. Aber der Zweck der Beachtung kann nur die Erkenntnis sein, daß diese Unterschiede im Wesen der Dinge *keine* Bedeutung haben." *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3.

23 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 111–12.

24 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 93. The encounter of the *Treue Gottes* to the human's *Gegentreue* creates a new relationship, one in which the human's resistance to loyalty to God is newly awakened. Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21; Martin Seils, *Glaube*, HST 13 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 189–93; and Juliane Schüz, *Glaube in Karl Barths „Kirchlicher Dogmatik“*. *Die anthropologische Gestalt des Glaubens zwischen Exzentrizität und Deutung*, TBT 182 (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 57–58.

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 137.

26 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 112–7; 132–35.

The work of the new being, the human made alive by God who calls being into existence from non-being, is the work of revolution, predicated on Christ having brought the sublation of all dependencies.²⁷ Human participatory action in grace is not to be isolated to certain experiences or practical knowledge. The great alteration in the God-world relation has already occurred and humanity has already been placed on the way of Abraham (*den Weg Abrahams*), where the risk of faith (*Wagnis des Glaubens*) is neither explained nor justified in its psychological character, “only God declares and justifies faith.”²⁸ Barth speaks of the risk of faith in relation to the realistic, anti-metaphysical, and historical occurrence of God's reconciliation. After preliminary comments on Romans 5:1–12, Barth proceeds topically by addressing death, sin, the world, sin of death, and ultimately the one human through whom all preceding contradictions are interwoven.²⁹ Faith is understood within the old, Adamic world and the new, Christ-world as being an affect and effect not of the subjective “mystical darkness” of a veiled subjective experience, but wrought by the Holy Spirit as the *objective* truth inclosing all humanity and their corresponding dualities.³⁰ The emphasis on the Spirit's all-encompassing relation to faith becomes clearer as Barth rereads Paul and reworks his commentary within the next year.

The transitional period from the onslaught of attention after Barth's publication of *Romans* I to his career change to the academy in 1921 is largely dependent on a mixture of socio-political and theological factors as well as transitions in

27 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 195–204. Barth will later refer explicitly to the “permanent revolution” from Karl Marx in his exegesis of Romans 8 (353). For Barth's appropriation and constructive political dialogue with the concept, see Paul Lehmann, “Karl Barth, Theologian of Permanent Revolution,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 28, no. 1 (1972): 67–81; Paul Lehmann, *The Transfiguration of Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 271–78; and Eberhard Jüngel, “Die theologischen Anfänge,” in *Barth-Studien*, 118–26. Revolution was a key theme during this time, particularly during the Weimar Republic and coming to terms with God's decree in relation to the governmental regime. Cf. Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich 1918–1934*, Bd. 1 (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1977), 3–25.

28 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 170. For an epistemological rendering of the *Wagnis des Glaubens*, see Barth's 1928 “Das Wagnis des Glaubens,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925–1930*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe III.24 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1994), 296–302. Even here, Barth indicates our faith on the level of *being*: “Wir sind nur durch Gott selbst Christen und haben keine Macht darüber, es zu sein, keine Mittel, es zu werden und zu bleiben. Daß wir es durch Gott selbst werden, sind und bleiben, das ist unser christlicher Glaube.” (297). For an analysis of this distinction in *Romans* I and *Romans* II, see Gockel, *Barth und Schleiermacher*, 104–15.

29 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 175–84.

30 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 189–90.

Barth's personal life.³¹ It is difficult to pinpoint a single determining reason for Barth's development of thought from one edition to the next.³² There is certainly evidence, to which Barth himself would later refer, of particular philosophical and theological influences on Barth during this period.³³ Whereas Fichte, Goethe, Blumhardt, and Schiller take up much of the material in chapter 4 of *Romans* I, Barth frequently references Nietzsche, offers long quotations of Luther and Calvin, appeals to Overbeck, and expresses the impossibility of Abraham's faith in its relation to Plato, Grünewald, and Dostoevsky in *Romans* II.³⁴ These specific influences in addition to his outright opposition to Schleiermacher and his newly found circle of friends, particularly Friedrich Gogarten, allowed Barth to evaluate freshly the relationship between the kingdom of God and the world.³⁵ In agreement with Overbeck, Barth would reject the synthesis created by modern theology between faith and history; synthesis is only found in

31 For a picture of the sociopolitical and theological context, see McCormack, *Critically Realistic*, 291–323; Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, 109–38; Gorringer, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*, 24–72; Nina Dorothee Müzlitz, *Gottes Wort als Wirklichkeit: Die Paulus-Rezeption des jungen Karl Barth (1906–1927)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2013), 179–94; Peterson, *The Early Barth*, 141–220; and Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (München: Beck, 2018), 99–108; 133–48.

32 Cf. Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten*, 79–98, where Busch directs specific attention to the fundamental eschatological shape of both editions.

33 Karl Barth, “Autobiographische Skizze im Fakultätsalbum der Ev.-Theol. Fakultät Münster (1927),” in Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Barth–Bultmann Briefwechsel 1922–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, Gesamtausgabe V.1 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1971), 308.

34 Barth's entire commentary on *Romans* 4:20 in *Romans* II, and a large portion of *Romans* I, is made up of a quote from Calvin and an extended quotation from Luther. Moreover, in 1922, Barth relates Abraham's faith to the “philosophy of Plato, the art of Grünewald and Dostoevsky, and the religion of Luther.” *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 128. Jüngel describes Barth's reception of Overbeck as “the end of Barth's theological beginnings,” and assesses many parallels and congruences between Overbeck and Barth. See Eberhard Jüngel, “Die theologischen Anfänge,” in *Barth–Studien*, 62–83, see 79–83 for a succinct analysis of Barth's appropriation of Plato. Cf. McCormack, *Critically Realistic*, 216–40 and Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth*, 162–68.

35 This newly found group of like-minded theologians is shown in its full expression, Barth says, in his lecture given at the Aargau Conference on April 17, 1920. Cf. “Autobiographische Skizze,” 308. In this 1920 lecture, he claims that the Bible is what offers knowledge of God. This knowledge, however, “is the beginning [*Anfang*], the end [*Ende*], the origin [*Ursprung*], and the limit [*Grenze*]” such that knowledge of God undergirds all other knowledge. Karl Barth, “Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke,” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie Teil 1*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Kaiser, 1974), 49–76.

God.³⁶ The shift regarding faith was a radicalized understanding of the faithfulness of God interfacing in Jesus Christ.³⁷

3 Objectivizing Faith, Religious Critique, and Pietistic Tendencies: *Römerbrief* 1922

Barth's departure from Hermann and Harnack, with whom Barth studied between 1906–1909, and his reading of Pietists like Philip Spener and August Francke (Barth was a heavy reader of Pietist biographies) are sharpened in his critique of experience (*Erlebnis*) in the 1920s.³⁸ Faith takes a prominent role in *Romans* II, especially in chapter 4 where Barth structures Paul's interpretation of the Abrahamic narrative into categories of faith: wonder (3:31–4:8), beginning (4:9–12), and creation (4:13–17a).³⁹ These themes are implicit in *Romans* I and are made explicit and clarified in *Romans* II. The descriptive vocabulary Barth uses to maintain the objectivity of faith remains consistent but is structured even more aggressively to express Barth's emphasis of faith being completely dependent on God's act of grace.

With the simple statement: "God is faithful" (*Gott ist treu*), Barth emphasizes the non-metaphysical God, the unknown God who becomes known as the known God while never simply being a *Ding an sich*.⁴⁰ All the way through, Barth remains committed to God's unwavering and irreversible faithfulness. God's faithfulness might be misconstrued, but it can never be sublated (*aufgehoben*). The consistency of God's faithfulness rests solely on God's self-faithfulness. God desires to speak, confessing God's self to the world that God is who God claims to be. Barth equates the faithfulness of God with the justification of God and the

³⁶ Chalamet directs congruency in Barth's dialectics in relation to Hermann as a thread seen from Barth's lecture in Elgersburg, "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie," to *Romans* II. See Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, 146–52. For Barth's essay first presented in Elgersburg on October 3, 1922 and then repeated in Emden on October 11, 1922, see Karl Barth, "Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie," in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. Holger Finze, Gesamtausgabe III.19 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 144–75.

³⁷ Cf. Schütz, *Glaube in Karl Barths* Kirchlicher Dogmatik, 57–8. Martin Seils describes Barth as "returning to the immediacy," *Glaube*, 189–90. The immediacy to which Seils is referring is not to be confused with the immediacy of connection with the personality of Jesus.

³⁸ For Barth's explicit references to Pietists like J.A. Bengel and F.C. Steinhof in *Romans* II, see Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten*, 98–108.

³⁹ For a brief indication of the structural differences, see Donald Wood, *Karl Barth's Theology of Interpretation* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 18–22.

⁴⁰ Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 112.

justification of God with Jesus of Nazareth, thus locating God's faithfulness in a historical narrative where God liberates God's self from the truth humans hold captive.⁴¹ How does faith function within this self-contained movement of God's encounter with humankind? Barth places faith on the same level as the existential: "Faith is itself the faithfulness of God."⁴² Seeking some sort of assurance of salvation, security in human self-justification, or a law of works would not do away with the paradox of faith: "God is known only through God, God's faithfulness alone through faith [...] The faithfulness of God in the paradox of faith is sufficient for us."⁴³ The paradox of faith is imperceptible outside its critical relationship with God's faithfulness. It thus only becomes perceptible again and again in its imperceptibility, seeking anything more is, on Barth's terms, actually less.

Abraham hears God's No as God's Yes and responds with faith; faith is, in this sense, self-negating.⁴⁴ The promise is received in faith, and *only* in faith since otherwise it would remain a mythical, quasi-abstract sentiment never truly touching the ground, thus creating a critically real and grace-infused relationship of reception and negation.⁴⁵ As Barth affirmed in chapter 3 regarding faith in God's justification as the last bending under the wrath of God (*die letzte Beugung unter Gottes Zorn*), he now appropriates the same wrath and rendering of justice (the two are one and the same for Barth, the divine *Trotzdem!*) to what is established in Abraham, that is, in Abraham's faith as an "unanschauliches Faktum, ein Wunder."⁴⁶ There is a hidden source orchestrating and continuously creating new possibilities. Moreover, as he confirmed in *Romans I*, albeit in different fashion, what is important is not simply that Abraham believed, but that he believed *God*, the object.⁴⁷ It does not matter how faithfully a person lives nor how religious or ethically righteous one might intend to be. The faithfulness of God is that which is effective *in* a person yet is not *of* a person, the prepositional

41 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 130–35.

42 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 138.

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 156–58.

44 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 171.

45 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 185.

46 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 171. Barth also uses the *Beugung vor Gott* throughout chapter 3 to discuss the recognition (*Anerkennung*) of human responsibility and bending before God's judgment as a sinner justified before God who is incapable of adding to God's truth and kingdom, yet responsible to "refrain from all lazy arts." See Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, esp. 118–20; 124–25. He also claims that as soon as the visible side of faith is determinative, it immediately becomes non-determinative, the illustrative and non-illustrative side are two-sides of faith, always existing in relation to one another. See Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 186–91.

47 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 167–68.

distinction is necessary; the existential reality of faith is a person *being* what one *is not* and recognized as such.⁴⁸ Barth closes his exegesis of Romans 4: “We believe – and we know that we have to add: we know from our faith only that it is always also unfaith. We, however, also know that faith as faith, as that which we do not know, is, with the faith of Abraham, the reversal of all things, the death of our death, the non-being of our non-being.”⁴⁹

The new believing subject is the non-existent subject under the sign of Jesus' death and resurrection, whereby in the strongest sense, the non-identical becomes identical predicating one's identity *with* the new human.⁵⁰ One does not believe in faith, but one does believe *that* one believes: “An observable, historical-psychological determination, and demarcation of those who believe over and against those who do not believe is impossible.”⁵¹ Separating the old from the new cannot be done apart from the constitutive personal being of God, in whom the negation of the old human subject and establishment of a new human subject occurs simultaneously. Where does this happen for Barth? It occurs in the self-grounded freedom of God in the completed crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, in which the content of faith is located. Faith has its source (*Quelle*) in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ from which “the new human lives through faith, because he lives from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is, however, only given to him through faith.”⁵² It might seem at first that Barth is simply reasserting a reformation theme that states the Holy Spirit gives faith to human beings. However, he is instituting a dialectical relationship not found in the Reformed systematization of the salvation event, namely, locating the reality of faith within the being of God without negating the ongoing, existential struggle of human faith. He can reframe this critically real relationship because he gives the event of Jesus' death on the cross (specifically his *oboedientia passiva*) universal, exclusive, singular, and irreversible significance in its relation to faith as source.⁵³

It is impossible to do justice in such a small space to Barth's tightly woven grammatical constructions and explications of how faith is dialectically understood by Paul through Barth in Romans. However, we have seen through our ex-

48 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 170–71.

49 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 203. Dalferth has placed an existential bite on this same sentiment in Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Umsonst: Eine Erinnerung an die kreative Passivität des Menschen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 28–37.

50 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 205; 218–21; 224–26.

51 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 205.

52 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 218.

53 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 247–51.

egetical analysis that faith in *Romans I* and *Romans II* has no objective content in and of itself, as Barth's famous crater/void (*Hohlraum*) analogy confirms. The form of faith is the event of the cross of Golgotha and filled with the "novelty of the promise."⁵⁴ The declaration of righteousness received by Abraham in faith is only possible because its object is the way of death out of which Jesus brings life. The subjective and objective possibility always becoming impossible, the hopeless faith in hopeful disbelief, and the visibility of the invisible are just some descriptors used to describe Abraham's faith. We see Abraham taking the step out of and toward a place where only God can hold him, yet we don't actually see this step, nor do we see Abraham *doing* anything. All of Abraham's steps have led toward *this* step and come *from* this step.⁵⁵ We have also encountered how Barth's eschatological components are up and running in an apocalyptic way.⁵⁶

4 Moving Beyond an Individualized Faith

Barth was born into a deeply religious, Pietist family, a pastoral lineage dating back several generations.⁵⁷ Toward the end of his career, he sat down to discuss his theology with a group of Methodist pastors. The pressing question in their minds related to how Barth understood the psychological experience of salvation. The question regarding the psychological element of salvation had still not been answered. The range of questioning here, however, has widened significantly since his critique of Pietism formulated in *Romans I* and *Romans II* given the subsequent publication of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, revealing the seeming

54 Michael Beintker, "Dialektische Theologie," in *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 203–4. He articulates three specific dialectical motifs: "The crisis-motif, the transition-free (*übergangslose*) eschatology *creatio ex nihilo* of salvation, and the abolition of history in the eschatological moment" (204).

55 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 195.

56 For a developmental picture of Barth's early theological relation to apocalyptic theology, see Bruce McCormack, "Longing for a New World: On Socialism, Eschatology, and Apocalyptic in Barth's Early Dialectical Theology," in *Theologie im Umbruch: Karl Barths frühe Dialektische Theologie*, eds. Georg Pfeleiderer and Harald Matern (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014), 135–150.

57 Cf. Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf*, 13–20; Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten*, see especially 50–54; 90–98; and Tietz, *Karl Barth*, 15–30. For the lasting influence of Barth on the influential perception (good and bad) of Pietism as well as his dependence on Albrecht Ritschl's understanding, see Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 1–18.

opaque, at the very least dissatisfactory, answers Barth had given to the common critique plaguing his entire academic career. Barth responds to the question regarding the salvation experience in 1961: "The Holy Spirit brings about this joyful certainty, yet not with regard to something *I* have accomplished or something *I* have grasped."⁵⁸ Barth does not negate the individual experience of salvation. What Barth does deny, however, is the certainty of salvation being contained within human psychological faculties. The certainty lies in the object of faith; the person, the event, in whom one believes is vastly more important than one's ability to possess faith.

The relation of the objective to the subjective realities of faith brings to focus a theme represented in Barth's continued conversations with Rudolf Bultmann, namely, the conscious perceptibility of faith.⁵⁹ Clearly it is not possible to entertain a lengthy comparison of the two positions here as is needed for a sufficient analysis; however, a few points are worth briefly mentioning. Bultmann did not provide an official review of *Romans* I, yet he certainly holds one of the main spotlights for engagement with Barth's understanding of faith surrounding the further editing and publications of Barth's *Römerbrief*.⁶⁰ For Bultmann, the contents of consciousness have validity and meaning apart from the historical and psychological processes without necessitating existence beyond consciousness.⁶¹ Faith is only faith if its conscious content (*Bewußtseinsinhalt*) is perceptible in one's consciousness and understood to be "throughout a specific determination of the content of our consciousness," without turning into a process.⁶² For Barth, as shown in this essay, faith is consciously conceived in some respects, but the content of this faith is not based in one's conscience; it is refor-

58 Karl Barth, "Gespräche mit Methodistenpredigern (1961)," 174. One year prior to this conversation, Barth sat down with Pietist leaders of the Herrnhut Brüdergemeinde, from which Schleiermacher came, to discuss Barth's later engagement with Zinzendorf. See Barth, "Gespräch mit Vertretern der Herrnhuter Brüdergemeinde (1960)," 124–57.

59 Bultmann's review of Barth's *Romans* II appeared in May of 1922 in *Die christliche Welt* 36, to which Barth replies in his third preface to *Romans* II in 1924. Cf. Eike Christian Hirsch, "Glauben–Wissen und Verwirklichen," in *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum 80. Geburtstag*, eds. Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier and Max Geiger (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag Zürich, 1966), 346–65; Eberhard Jüngel, "Glauben und Verstehen. Zum Theologiebegriff Rudolf Bultmanns (1985)," in *Wertlose Wahrheit: Zur Identität und Relevanz des christlichen Glaubens*, TE III (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 16–77.

60 Bultmann did, of course, articulate a relatively negative outlook on Barth's *Romans* I, claiming it was filled with a mystical view of piety and history. Rudolf Bultmann, "Ethische und mystische Religion im Urchristentum," in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie: Teil 2*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Kaiser, 1967), 29–47. Cf. Chalamet, *Dialectical Theologians*, 115–20.

61 Bultmann, "Karl Barths 'Römerbrief' in zweiter Auflage," 130–32.

62 Bultmann, "Karl Barths 'Römerbrief' in zweiter Auflage," 132.

mulated, uprooted, and given a new reference where a person is no longer self-referential. One might even say faith is contained within God's own consciousness. Where the two might agree is in affirming that faith necessitates confession (*Bekennntnis*). However, the difference is the subject of this confession; for Barth, it is God's self-confession of God's self-faithfulness to humanity and for Bultmann it is the human existential subject confessing faith in a particular situation.

The perceptibility of this imperceptible occurrence of faith is not a metaphysical abstraction; rather, it is something which happens temporally and is given a "human face."⁶³ Barth uses similar language to describe faith in a short list of theses sent at the request from Bremen pastor, Anton Mallow. Barth defines faith as a predicate of the new human subject as he does in Romans 5. He continues to describe faith as the primal work of the Holy Spirit, and uses the three terms, "miracle, beginning, and creation," to describe the gift of the "electing God."⁶⁴ These short theses show one instance of Barth's dogmatic reflections on how his *Römerbrief* was received. The dialectic, for Barth, cannot be equated as only that of Hegel and Kierkegaard. For Barth, the threefold movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is changed to a "permanent being in motion (*Bewegtsein*) of human thinking between divine negation and divine location," where the originating unity is found only in God.⁶⁵ The being in motion is an eternal and dynamic movement so that the perceptible reality of faith remains contently imperceptible. It is only *as* an imperceptible reality which occurs in, yet is not bound to, human consciousness that the reality of the kingdom of God hidden within and continuously giving meaning to history becomes perceptible. The immediate consequence is that faith is never capable of being weaponized; faith is not a product of historical manifestations or influences; faith is not a demarcation between those who are welcomed or those who are eternally damned; and, finally, faith is a possession and reality only in the unity of God.⁶⁶ Barth's construal of faith in these terms indeed leaves humanity in a

63 Cf. Karl Barth, *Erklärung des Epheser- und des Jakobusbriefes 1919–1929*, ed. Jörg-Michael Bohnet, Gesamtausgabe II.46 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2009), 144.

64 Barth, "Diskussionsthese für einen Vortrag in Bremen (1922)," 176–79, here 178. Regarding reprobation and election in *Romans II*, see Gockel, *Barth and Schleiermacher*, 115–24.

65 Beintker, "Dialektische Theologie," 204.

66 William Stacy Johnson has placed emphasis on this aspect in Barth's mature expression of faith in § 63 of *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/1*, which as he sees it, is consistent with Barth's early explication in places like *Romans II* and "Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie (1929)." He claims: "Barth seems to be saying that the reality of faith is a part of God's revelation, and thus in some sense a part of God. God became real in Jesus of Nazareth. But God also wishes to become real again and again in the lives of God's faithful followers." William Stacy Johnson, "The 'Reality' of

very uncomfortable situation – humans desire control, mastery, and power. On Barth terms, such desire for and enactment of control, mastery, and power is stripped away, placed firmly in the objective reality of God.

5 Concluding Thoughts

Barth construed faith as an imperceptible reality within consciousness while at the same time maintaining a dialectical distinction between the objective content of such faith. The *fides quae creditur* cannot be confused or mixed with the *fides qua creditur*. Human faith is in fact included in the divine act of revelation, but it is never *given over* in the act, preserving the content; the how is contained in the what. Willie Jennings, in reference to the 16th century Jesuit José Acosta, explicates the intertwining colonial imagination and coherence of traditional Christian doctrine: “The faith that believes and the faith that is believed are tightly bound together, and the ambiguity of the new situation rests first in the believing subject but soon enters the content of faith.”⁶⁷ Such ambiguity and conflating of the two forms of faith have disastrous effects as history continues to show. Unfortunately, history continues to repeat itself where human alignment of oppression with faith is understood as being a part of progressing God’s will and kingdom.

What do we have to learn from Barth’s dialectically charged and often nuanced understanding of faith espoused in the early 20th century? For one, ideas have consequences. Specifically, the individualizing of faith as the only plane on which the content and subject of faith reside, relativizes truth – it sublates the fight against hegemonious idealism. The individual harnesses the true faith and only those who adhere to a prescribed faith in a presupposed way truly participate in the wealth and benefits of the Christ event.⁶⁸ Such an understanding of faith does not get off the ground on Barth’s terms. If we follow Barth’s historical logic of our history occurring in some sense side-by-side with Abraham’s history, the promise of the faithfulness of God is the objective reality to which

Faith,” in *The Reality of Faith in Theology*, eds. Bruce McCormack and Gerrit Neven (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 205–220, here 219.

⁶⁷ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 83.

⁶⁸ A comparison of the denominational movements in the US and attempts to establish some version of a “Christian America” to the developments of 19th and 20th century German Pietism would be one way of investigating the effects of such an individualized piety on cultural hegemony and dominance. See Hartmut Lehmann, “Die neue Lage,” in *Geschichte des Pietismus*, 1–26.

mind, conscience, and being conform. The cross of Golgotha is the objective content and subjective form of faith. Attempts to turn faith into something malleable and able to be controlled remain void and Barth repeatedly emphasized a reliance on the faithfulness of God to fulfill God's promise of freedom and liberation as we partake in God's permanent revolution. Facing current political and theological hegemonies and systems of oppression, leading one to place faith *in* faith, Barth's construal of the absolute imperceptible reality which breaks into our perceptible capacities and provides certainty of *God's* faithfulness is a timely reminder.⁶⁹

69 For a productive construal of human creative passivity, see Dalferth, *Umsonst*, 50–60; 92–131. For the indispensability of faith for human becoming as “resonances” of divine becoming, see Markus Mühling, “Perceiving Values in the Story of the Gospel: A Sketch in 11 Theses,” in *Perceiving Truth and Value: Interdisciplinary Discussions on Perception as the Foundation of Ethics*, eds. Markus Mühling, David A. Gillard, and Yvonne Förster (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 117–31.

Elio Jaillet

L'exercice de la liberté, la vie du Crucifié Ressuscité. Rm 6,9 entre la première et la deuxième édition du *Römerbrief*

Abstract: Against the backdrop of a pragmatic reading of Karl Barth's theological evolution, this article examines Barth's legacy for contemporary theology through a micro-logical comparison of the two first editions of the *Römerbrief* commentary on Romans 6:9. A close analysis shows both the continuities and the discontinuities between the two editions. Through them we gain access to the *movement* which Barth tries to emulate in his writing: a theology of freedom, indissociable from the semiotic interplay of cross and resurrection. Following Barth's lead, the life of the (free) theologian grounds itself in engagement with this interplay.

1 Introduction

La présente contribution se construit sur l'arrière-plan de la réception de l'œuvre de Karl Barth pour aujourd'hui : Que pouvons-nous retenir du *Römerbrief*¹ de Karl Barth plus d'un siècle après sa première édition ? En quoi le geste théologique si particulier de cette publication séminale peut-il nous orienter dans l'exercice de la théologie aujourd'hui ?

Dans cet article je propose une esquisse de réponse au travers d'une comparaison micro-logique du commentaire sur Rm 6,9 entre les deux premières éditions. L'interprétation de cette comparaison se fait sous l'horizon d'une lecture pragmatique de l'œuvre théologique de Karl Barth. Dans un premier temps je donne les contours du cadre interprétatif adopté pour cet article. Ensuite je déploie la comparaison sous ses différents angles (dispositions structurelles, éléments d'accords, éléments de tension) et je termine avec une brève évaluation de l'intérêt de la posture théologique développée par Barth. Je l'annonce ici brièvement : la théologie chez Barth se présente comme un exercice de la liberté.

1 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, éd. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985) ; Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, éd. Cornelius van der Kooi et Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010). Pour la traduction française de la seconde édition cf. Karl Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, trad. Pierre Jundt (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2016). Pour des questions de longueur, je ferai référence aux passages du texte, mais les citations seront limitées.

La spécificité de cet exercice est donnée par le réseau de signes mobilisé pour réfléchir cette liberté et l'engager dans la parole.

2 Le statut théologique du commentaire

Lors de sa période dite «libérale», Barth développe une conception de la théologie que l'on peut appeler une «théologie pratique» (*Praktische Theologie*) – au sens qu'elle est elle-même *praxis*.² J'en résume ici brièvement les contours.

Sous les conditions de la modernité, tant au niveau de la pensée que du développement sociétal, le développement de la foi chrétienne implique la conscience de l'autonomie irréductible des individus et de l'inscription de cette autonomie dans les déterminations de l'histoire et de la nature – c'est ce double aspect qui en fait des «personnes». Sous cet angle, la «foi» est traduite dans la catégorie reforgee de «religion». Pour Barth, c'est au travers des actes et paroles posés par une personnalité intégrée que la religion se développe dans la société en constituant à la fois les individus comme individus et comme membres de la société.³ La théologie a à la fois pour tâche de réfléchir ce mouvement de manière théorique et de le générer.⁴ Selon Georg Pfleiderer, cette intention se

2 Je reprends ici la reconstruction proposée par Georg Pfleiderer dans sa thèse d'habilitation : *Karl Barths praktische Theologie. Zu Genese und Kontext eines paradigmatischen Entwurfs systematischer Theologie im 20. Jahrhundert*, BHTh 115 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). Celle-ci essaie d'offrir une interprétation plus distanciée de l'évolution de la théologie de Barth, par rapport à d'autres interprétations qui restent attachées aux tropes théologiques utilisés par Barth. Cf. Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths*, BEvTh 97 (München: Kaiser, 1985) ; Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der «dialektischen Theologie» Karl Barths. Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der «Kirchlichen Dogmatik»*, BEvTh 101 (München: Kaiser, 1987) ; Cornelis van der Kooi, *Anfängliche Theologie. Der Denkweg des jungen Karl Barth (1909 bis 1927)*, BEvTh 103 (München: Kaiser, 1987) ; Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

3 Barth formule précisément ce projet en débat avec le projet d'Ernst Troeltsch et afin de faire évoluer les positions théoriques héritées de son maître Wilhelm Herrmann en s'appuyant sur l'épistémologie néokantienne proposée par Hermann Cohen – dans une certaine mesure aussi Paul Natorp – et développée par son frère Heinrich Barth. Sur le développement de cette réflexion chez Barth, voir les analyses serrées et denses chez Pfleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 180–213. Cette réflexion atteint un tournant pragmatique, qui se confirme tant dans l'impression que l'intervention de John Mott, le 6 février 1911 à Genève laisse sur Barth, que dans son engagement pastoral et politique. Voir Pfleiderer *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 215–33.

4 Dans la conception du jeune Barth, l'idée de Dieu indique pour la conscience religieuse la tension entre absoluité et personnalité. Tant l'idée de Dieu que la conscience religieuse sont

poursuit dans l'œuvre théologique de Barth, bien que la *forme* du discours change et que le type d'*agent* visé par la théologie change lui aussi au fil de l'œuvre.

C'est au regard de cette compréhension de la théologie barthienne comme une « théologie pratique » que l'on peut situer le statut théologique du *Römerbrief*. Il est une mise en forme particulière du geste théologique barthien.⁵ Selon le décodage opéré par Pfleiderer, ce qui est visé par le texte est la constitution d'une avant-garde théologique, dans laquelle se réalise concrètement le sujet de connaissance et d'action moderne : le sujet d'action libre (*freies Handlungssubjekt*). Vue sous cet angle, la différence entre les deux éditions porte sur la manière de réaliser ce but : la première édition tente encore de le faire au travers de l'affirmation positive de l'idée de Dieu comme d'un *donné* de l'expérience religieuse. La seconde renonce à une présentation directe de ce donné mais dirige la structuration de l'identité du lecteur strictement *au travers* de la pragmatique vocative-réflexive du texte. La réflexivité dialectique de la seconde édition a pour but d'activer « religieusement » le lecteur *comme* théologien moderne d'avant-garde qui a conscience du caractère théologiquement construit de sa propre expérience religieuse (sa foi) et en même temps de la liberté radicale que cette construction suppose et indique. Le lecteur est appelé « par Dieu » – c'est-à-dire, par la réalité effective visée par l'idée de Dieu telle que le *Römerbrief* la met en scène – à la connaissance et à la mise en œuvre de sa propre liberté *via* la réflexivité provoquée et mise en scène par le texte, réflexivité que l'on peut alors qualifier de « théologique ».⁶

Dans ce cadre le texte biblique opère comme une matrice de la construction de cette identité théologique et de la subjectivité qui s'y rapporte.⁷ Il y a d'abord une forme d'émerveillement par rapport aux possibilités que présente cette matrice.⁸ Elle présente en effet l'histoire d'un Dieu qui est dit libérateur, créateur, etc. Cette histoire est elle-même figurée au travers de signes, de figures, d'images

donc constituées dialectiquement. Le moment religieux devient donc une composante essentielle de la personnalité et donc de la compréhension de l'agentivité, voir Pfleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 234–37.

⁵ La première œuvre qui réalise cette intention serait selon Pfleiderer le recueil de prédication édité avec son ami Eduard Thurneysen, voir Karl Barth et Eduard Thurneysen, *Suchet Gott, so werdet ihr leben!* (Bern: G.U. Bäschlin, 1917).

⁶ Voir Pfleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 315.

⁷ C'est particulièrement le cas pour l'épître de Paul aux Romains, voir Pfleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 275–76.

⁸ Ce point est bien illustré par la conférence donnée par Karl Barth en 1916, «Le nouveau monde de la Bible», in *Parole de Dieu et parole humaine* (Paris : Les Bergers et les Mages, 1966), 23–42.

et de métaphores dont les potentialités seront mises en œuvre par le lecteur.⁹ Pour le théologien, il ne s'agira pas simplement de *répéter* les configurations de signes proposées par le texte, mais de les réinvestir de manière originale par rapport aux exigences du temps présent, en exerçant sa propre liberté.¹⁰ C'est ce qu'il faut lire derrière les indices herméneutiques présentés dans le *Römerbrief*. Il s'agirait, selon Barth de «laisser parler Paul», et se faisant de se mettre à ses côtés, voire de discuter avec lui, afin de donner la parole à la *Sache* du texte, qui relie et lie tant l'auteur que le commentateur.¹¹ La détermination de la *Sache* reste intentionnellement floue, dans la mesure où elle est le signe de la liberté du théologien, telle qu'elle réfléchit la liberté de «Dieu» lui-même. Ce que ce geste présuppose en revanche, pour assurer la validité de son propos, c'est le crédit accordé au propos du texte biblique. Richard Burnett parle à ce titre d'une herméneutique de l'«amour et de la confiance» apprise à «l'école de l'Esprit-Saint».¹²

C'est sur l'arrière-fond de ces éléments que l'on peut tenter de faire une lecture comparée des deux éditions. Sur quoi exactement porte la réécriture de ces textes monumentaux ? Le changement est-il uniquement formel ou bien y a-t-il un changement plus substantiel dans les visées pragmatiques-théologiques du texte ? La thèse de Pfeleiderer, d'une radicalisation de l'intégration de la réflexivité critique dans la subjectivité théologique, se laisse-t-elle vérifier à l'aune d'une lecture serrée du texte ? L'interprétation du texte paulinien initie-t-elle un jeu de signes complètement différent entre les deux éditions ?

Pour offrir une réponse provisoire à ces différentes questions, j'ai choisi d'opérer une comparaison micro-logique se concentrant sur le commentaire de

9 Plus tard, dans la *Dogmatique*, Barth parlera des Écritures comme de la *Zeichengebung* que présuppose la prédication, *Dogmatique*, vol. 3 (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1954), 19–20.

10 Le statut théorique du texte biblique pour l'exercice théologique n'est pas encore pleinement articulé dans la période du *Römerbrief*. C'est à partir des premières leçons de dogmatique à Göttingen, que ce statut sera spécifié, voir Pfeleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 394–422.

11 Ce sont les projets de préface de la première édition qui donnent accès aux principes herméneutiques de Barth. Outre la préface publiée initialement en *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3–4, ce ne sont pas moins de 6 projets de préface qui ont précédé la version qui a été publiée en fin de compte. Celles-ci sont publiées et éditées sur la base de notes manuscrites en *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 581–602.

12 Richard E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, WUNT 2/145 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 184–206. Burnett montre que Barth se situe de manière critique par rapport aux modèles herméneutiques antérieurs, 56–64, 142–183.

Rm 6,9 : « Nous le savons en effet : ressuscité des morts, Christ ne meurt plus ; la mort sur lui n'a plus d'empire ». ¹³

3 Les variations du jeu

3.1 Justification de l'extrait

L'intérêt du chapitre 6 de l'épître aux Romains réside dans le fait qu'il présente le fondement de la condition humaine pour la foi chrétienne. Il le fait par l'affirmation du *passage irréversible* d'Adam à Jésus-Christ (Rm 5) : « Puisque nous sommes morts au péché, comment vivre encore dans le péché ? » (6,2b). Mais en même temps, il met en scène une forme de *continuité dans le passage*, une continuité thématique notamment par la condition d'esclave (Rm 6,16ss). L'auditoire auquel Paul s'adresse est passé de l'esclavage du péché à l'esclavage de la justice (Rm 6,16 – 18). Il y a rupture irréversible *et* continuité pour la *condition humaine* dans l'événement de la réconciliation entre Dieu et l'humanité. Dans ce cadre, le verset 9 indique la condition historico-narrative du passage d'une condition à l'autre. S'intéresser au v. 9 invite alors à se concentrer sur un élément narratif central pour la *motivation* du propos de l'épître : de l'événement de la résurrection découle à la fois l'affirmation de la rupture entre deux conditions anthropologiques *et* la compréhension de la continuité propre à la vie humaine. Par son usage du motif de la résurrection, Paul identifie le fondement de l'existence actuelle de celles et ceux à qui s'adresse l'épître.

En conséquence, comment faut-il qualifier la vie présente de celui qui affirme cette connaissance ? Si cette question, et la réponse que l'on y donne, divise les exégètes actuels de l'épître aux Romains, elle semble également marquer la différence entre les deux éditions du *Römerbrief* de Barth. Dans la mesure où le texte barthien vise à configurer une certaine subjectivité, ce passage de l'épître est particulièrement important pour l'identification du « fondement » ou de la « source » de cette identité et des signes qui s'y rapportent. ¹⁴ L'analyse de ce verset pivot de l'épître paulinienne se prête alors particulière-

¹³ Traduction œcuménique de la Bible (Villiers-le-Bel ; Paris : Bibli'O ; Cerf, 2010).

¹⁴ Concernant l'importance de l'articulation entre crucifixion et résurrection pour la théologie chrétienne, voir Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Der auferweckte Gekreuzigte. Zur Grammatik der Christologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994).

ment bien pour rendre compte du *passage* de la première version du texte à sa refonte, tout en permettant d'interroger l'unité de leur préoccupation.¹⁵

3.2 La structuration du commentaire entre les deux éditions

On peut relever dans un premier temps une différence dans la délimitation de la péripécie commentée. Dans la première édition, le v. 9 ouvre une séquence strictement descriptive (v. 9–11). Elle porte sur le Christ crucifié et ressuscité, présenté comme le *contenu* du savoir à partir duquel est qualifié notre vie. Dans la seconde édition, c'est le v. 8 qui ouvre cette séquence (v. 8–11), plaçant ainsi l'ensemble de la séquence descriptive sous le signe de la foi.

Il y a aussi une différence importante dans la structuration du chapitre 6. Dans la première édition, le commentaire du chapitre 6 est organisé en fonction d'indices rhétoriques (la reprise de la question du v. 1 au v. 15).¹⁶ La première partie (6,1–14) inclut en conséquence une séquence exhortative (v. 12–14), qualifiant précisément les membres de la communauté comme étant *déjà* ressuscités (v. 13). Cependant, cette perspective n'est pas abstraite de la référence à la crucifixion du Christ. La qualification de la vie présente comme vie dans la résurrection est donnée dans la mort de Jésus sur la croix (cf. le titre des v. 1–14 dans la première édition : «*Karfreitag*»¹⁷). Le déploiement parénétique en tant que tel (6,15–23) se présente comme une conséquence de la résurrection. Cet événement fonde le refus de penser le péché comme une possibilité de celui qui

¹⁵ Michael Wolter insiste sur le caractère entièrement *futur* de la vie qui est celle de Jésus-Christ. Pour Paul, la vie des croyants et croyantes n'est pas encore renouvelée. Ce n'est que par la relation à Jésus-Christ, donc sous la condition de la foi, qu'ils sont passés de la mort à la vie, *Der Brief an die Römer (Teilband 1: Röm 1–8)*, EKK 6/1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn; Ostfildern: Neukirchener; Patmos, 2014), 383. À l'inverse, selon Robert Jewett le présent est bien *déjà* le lieu de la vie dans la résurrection, car elle seule fait la différence entre un type de comportement et un autre, manifeste une vie et non une autre, *Romans. A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 408. Dans une partie de la recherche sur la théologie de Barth, cette différence d'interprétation est ce qui distingue les deux premières éditions du *Römerbrief* de Barth, voir Beintker, *Dialektik*, 121–27 ; van der Kooi, *Anfängliche Theologie*, 92–93, 147–50 ; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 182–83 ; Christophe Chalamet, *Théologies dialectiques. Aux origines d'une révolution intellectuelle*, Lieux théologiques 49 (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2015), 150–59.

¹⁶ Barth reprend d'ailleurs cette structuration du commentaire ultérieurement dans sa *Kurze Erklärung des Römerbriefes* (München: Kaiser, 1956) ; *Petit commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1956), 62–64. Cette organisation suit l'exégèse majoritaire, représentée notamment par Jewett, *Romans*, 391–92.

¹⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 208.

vit sous la grâce (cf. le titre de cette seconde partie dans la première édition : «*Ostern*»¹⁸). Mais cette répartition implique que la vie hors du péché est présentée comme étant réellement *donnée* (cf. 6,12–14).

Dans la seconde édition en revanche, le v. 12 ouvre déjà une section distincte, structurant alors le chapitre 6 autour de la distinction entre *indicatif* de la grâce et *impératif* de la grâce.¹⁹ Les v. 1–11 portent sur la *force de la résurrection*, comme rupture eschatologique de la dialectique. Cette rupture implique l'impossibilité de la réversibilité du péché et de la grâce pour celui qui existe dans la foi (le baptisé), son existence étant fondée dans une certaine *connaissance* (indicatif).²⁰ Les v. 12–23 portent sur la *force de l'obéissance* isolant textuellement la dimension de l'agir de la dimension de la connaissance, bien que les deux restent clairement dépendants l'un de l'autre – c'est l'usage du verbe «*obéir*» (ὕπακούειν) au v. 12 qui marque la rupture entre les deux sections.²¹

Ces différences de structuration ne sont pas seulement la conséquence de changements dans le parcours intellectuel de l'auteur. Ces choix reflètent la difficulté de la configuration sémiotique du texte paulinien. Le passage des v. 12–14 d'une unité textuelle à l'autre, ainsi que les choix alternatifs dans le séquençage des v. (8)9–11 sont l'indice de ce que le texte impose à l'exégète : la réalité du *fait* de la réconciliation effectuée sur la croix et proclamée dans la résurrection comme point d'ancrage pour l'identité de celles et ceux qui vivent dans la foi – les lecteurs modèles du texte.²² Les changements de structure ont des incidences pour la lecture du texte et donc pour la constitution de l'identité qu'il vise.

¹⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 233–34.

¹⁹ Cette structuration correspond à une position minoritaire dans l'exégèse contemporaine, représentée par Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 367.

²⁰ Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 261–62. Barth interprète précisément l'énonciation du contenu de cette impossibilité à partir de Rm 3,22 (264–66). L'ensemble de ce passage (v. 1–11) est placé sous la condition de l'existence dans la foi (Rm 5,1), faisant de son thème la *connaissance* propre à cette impossibilité originnaire (voir les verbes indiquant une action de type *noétique* employés aux versets 6,3.6.9.11).

²¹ Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 287. L'impératif de la grâce, est complètement articulé à l'indicatif de la grâce, qui repose lui-même sur la relation étroite entre crucifixion et résurrection (295).

²² Dans le processus de coopération textuelle, le «lecteur modèle est un ensemble de *conditions de succès* [...] qui doivent être satisfaites pour qu'un texte soit pleinement actualisé dans son contenu potentiel». Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula. Le rôle du lecteur* (Paris : Grasset, 1985), 77.

3.3 Analyse et comparaison des extraits

Nous pouvons maintenant entrer dans les extraits du commentaire de Barth sur Rm 6,9.²³ Dans un premier temps je souhaite rendre compte des points d'accords entre les deux éditions. J'en retiens principalement trois : (i) l'utilisation du motif de la résurrection ; (ii) l'articulation de l'anthropologie ; (iii) le statut de Jésus-Christ. Dans un deuxième temps j'examinerai les tensions entre les deux textes. Elles se condensent autour du lexique de « l'objet ».

3.4 Les points d'accords entre les deux éditions

(i) Aucun des deux textes ne présente la résurrection comme un événement *saisissable*, mais comme un événement *qui saisit*, qui *donne à connaître* plutôt qu'il ne peut être connu, qui n'est pas soumis à de quelconques aléas mais qui *se tient*, pour ainsi dire, hors de tout *aléa* – la résurrection est un acte de la pleine souveraineté divine. En ce sens, l'affirmation qu'il ne s'agit pas d'un événement historique parmi d'autres – et sous *historique*, on peut placer tout ce qui est de l'ordre d'une *possibilité humaine* – est commune aux deux textes. Cela peut se constater dans le fait que les deux éditions affirment le caractère indissoluble (*unauf löslich*) de la vie du Christ.

(ii) Les deux éditions insistent sur le fait que dans cet événement c'est la vie humaine *véritable* qui est dévoilée, c'est-à-dire la vie humaine *selon Dieu*, la vie humaine telle qu'elle est *connue par Dieu*. Dans les deux cas, le couple crucifixion-résurrection indique que c'est *en Dieu* qu'est déterminé ce qu'il en est de l'humanité, que c'est *en Dieu*, tel qu'il se révèle en Jésus-Christ, que toute anthropologie trouve son point de départ.

(iii) Le statut de Jésus-Christ est identique dans les deux éditions : il est le Vivant, le crucifié-ressuscité, celui qui *ne meurt plus*, la séquence qui va de la crucifixion à la résurrection n'étant *pour lui* et pour *nous en lui* pas réversible. Il s'agirait là d'une séquence dont Barth affirme qu'elle est *réelle*.

²³ Les portions de texte comparées se trouvent respectivement en Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 224–25, et Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 283–84.

3.5 Les points de tension entre les deux éditions

Dans la première édition, Barth parle de ce qui est annoncé par le texte comme d'une «vérité objective d'au-delà» (*objektive, jenseitige Wahrheit*). Il y a «objet». Mais il faut tout de suite spécifier la qualité de cet «objet» : il ne provient pas du royaume de ce qui est soumis à l'échange incessant du *oui* et du *non*, au royaume de la mort. C'est un «objet» qui vient de l'*au-delà* de ce royaume. S'il y a un *réalisme* ici, c'est ainsi qu'il faut le comprendre : c'est cette réalité de l'*au-delà* qui est *objet* du discours et qui est donc à annoncer. L'accent est mis sur le caractère *donné* de cet objet.

Dans la seconde édition, les conditions pour la description de ce réalisme sont intégrées à la description elle-même : Barth introduit l'opposition intuitionnable/non-intuitionnable (*anschaulich/unanschaulich*), ainsi que la relation entre «objet de connaissance» et «sujet de connaissance». Énoncer le *contenu de la foi* implique d'y ajouter le rappel des conditions épistémologiques *de la connaissance de la foi* – l'accent est donc mis sur le moment réflexif. Simplement dire que l'objet qui est à annoncer est d'*au-delà* ne suffit pas. Ainsi, dans la 2^e édition, Barth détermine complètement la lecture du v. 9 à partir du v. 8 : «La foi est le matériau premier et dernier, unique et décisif, de cette psychologie de la grâce, qui s'ose à constater le non-donné de l'être humain en Dieu comme étant donné». ²⁴

Ce processus de connaissance se déroule de la façon suivante : la seule chose qui est de l'ordre de l'intuition, c'est le «chemin de mort de Jésus» (*Todesweges Jesu*). Dans le baptême, les lecteurs de l'épître participent de la mise à mort dans laquelle culmine ce chemin. La mort est l'horizon de toute intuition, qui est ici identifiée à la possibilité humaine et qui trouve son terme sur la croix : il n'y a en conséquence rien à connaître ici, hormis la mort comme fin de toute connaissance. C'est le cas si l'on en reste à l'intuition prise pour elle-même, si l'on fait abstraction du *donné* de la foi. À cette abstraction s'oppose ce qui est de l'ordre du non-intuitionnable – ce qui est *de la foi* – mais qui pour sa part propose à cet endroit les conditions pour une connaissance réelle, c'est-à-dire une connaissance qui articule la relation entre un objet et un sujet de connaissance.

Dans la foi, je vois ce qui ne peut autrement être vu (objet de connaissance). Mais connaître «*dans la foi*» signifie précisément la primauté du «*je suis connu*»,

²⁴ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 196 (traduction modifiée); «Glaube ist das erste und letzte, das einzige und entscheidenden Material jener Psychologie der Gnade, die das Nicht-Gegebene des Seins des Menschen in Gott als gegeben festzustellen sich getraut». *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 278.

c'est-à-dire la constitution effective du sujet religieux – celui qui ne se comprend lui-même que dans la mesure où il se comprend comme étant «déterminé par Dieu» à être celui qu'il est.²⁵ Ce mouvement à la fois exorbitant et recentrant de la connaissance de la foi dépend ici de la référence aux éléments du récit pascal. Dans la foi, la connaissance m'est *donnée dans la mort de Jésus* – mort à laquelle je participe par le baptême. Mais la connaissance donnée dans cette mort m'advient elle-même dans la *force de la résurrection* – et je serais tenté de dire : dans la force *qu'est* la résurrection,²⁶ c'est-à-dire, une force qui a son origine dans une action dont le seul sujet est celui qui connaît d'*au-delà*. Celui qui connaît ainsi n'est pas l'homme pécheur, mais le nouvel Adam tel qu'il est (re-) *connu* par Dieu. La mort devrait en effet être la fin de toute connaissance ou son impossibilité radicale. Mais du fait de la résurrection, la mort du Christ et la participation du croyant à cette mort devient la condition d'une *connaissance*. Cette mise en scène particulière du «sujet de connaissance» apparaît comme le lieu de constitution du lecteur modèle visé par le *Römerbrief* de Barth : un lecteur qui a une conscience critique de sa propre condition en tant que sujet «théologien» constitué dans et par la foi.

La tension entre la seconde et la première édition vient du fait que dans la seconde édition Barth intègre au commentaire de Rm 6,9 les conditions épistémologiques du contenu de connaissance de la foi. Mais à première vue, le contenu ainsi exposé ne semble pas changer entre les deux éditions. Pour la deuxième édition, lorsque je dis le contenu de la foi, je dis aussi d'où la foi me vient et comment elle me qualifie. Mais n'y a-t-il pas une rupture plus profonde précisément sur ce point ? Entre les deux éditions, Barth parle-t-il de la même *foi* ?

3.6 Le statut de la foi

Dans l'économie du texte, c'est en Rm 1,17b que Barth propose une première compréhension de la foi. Dans la première édition du commentaire, il utilise ici le lexique de l'organicité et de la croissance pour parler du rapport de l'existence

²⁵ Malgré les réserves de Pfeleiderer à l'égard de son étude, il est particulièrement frappant ici de relire les analyses de Spieckermann, lesquelles ont précisément pour thème la *connaissance de Dieu*. Elle analyse notamment le développement de ce thème entre la première édition du *Römerbrief* et l'*Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, voir notamment Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis*, 139.

²⁶ Anticipant ainsi sur ce qui sera développé à ce sujet dans la *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/2 § 64,4. Karl Barth, *Dogmatique*, tome 20 (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1968), 326 – 39.

chrétienne au temps.²⁷ Dans la foi, nous sommes *déjà* transformés, cette transformation étant une « anticipation du but » (*Vorausnahme des Zieles*).²⁸ Cette transformation *fait* une différence dans le temps et l'histoire, et cette différence passe *aussi* par nous. Pour le commentaire de Rm 6,9, reprenant le contenu de cette foi en tant qu'elle a son centre dans le crucifié-ressuscité, y correspond l'assurance que « le péché a été assumé dans son acte » (*die Sünde [wurde] in seiner Tat aufgehoben*),²⁹ ce qui a pour conséquence que l'on peut intégrer la *possibilité de l'obéissance* à l'énonciation de la réalité du contenu de connaissance propre à la foi.

Si l'on regarde maintenant le commentaire de Rm 1,17b de la seconde édition,³⁰ Barth intègre dans la définition de la foi ses conditions épistémologiques : celui qui vit dans la foi a le regard braqué sur le crucifié vivant, mais se sachant vivre réellement, à partir de ce point et de ce point uniquement – qui reste et demeure le terme de toute possibilité humaine. En participant à la mort de Jésus-Christ par le baptême – parce que la mort comme réalité de la séparation définitive d'avec Dieu est *aussi* devant le chrétien, mais déjà définitivement vaincue – le lecteur, s'il consent à l'identité que le texte lui propose, est inséré dans une certaine structure temporelle qui le mène à témoigner tant de la force *réelle* du Christ dans le présent, – dans ce que la tradition appelle la *sanctification*³¹ – que de la nécessité critique de constamment garder le crucifié-ressuscité en vue, là où il se tient souverainement : sur la croix, dans le passé auquel la prédication chrétienne rend témoignage. C'est de cette manière qu'il annonce le futur de l'accomplissement de la promesse de Dieu.

27 C'est autour de ce langage que se concentrent certaines interprétations de la rupture entre le premier et le second *Römerbrief*, voir Beintker, *Dialektik*, 95; McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 182–83.

28 Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 21.

29 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 225.

30 Voir Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 66.

31 C'est par ce terme que le *Petit commentaire* donne un titre à Rm 6 dans son ensemble, 61–69), ce qui le rattache au § 66 de la *Dogmatique*, tome 21 (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1970), 134–263. La conférence « Le chrétien dans la société » va déjà dans ce sens en 1919, peu de temps après la publication de la première édition du commentaire, et sans utiliser le langage de l'organicité, *Parole de Dieu et Parole humaine*, 62–63. Cependant il faut bien noter qu'à ce stade Barth n'utilise pas encore le lexique de la sanctification.

3.7 Évaluation de la comparaison

La première édition affirme qu'en Christ le péché est définitivement vaincu et que le lecteur modèle vit maintenant de la vie nouvelle que le Christ inaugure et qui doit encore trouver son plein accomplissement ; pour la seconde édition le lecteur modèle ne vit pleinement cette vie du Christ que *in futurum resurrectionis*, mais dans la mesure où il s'agit là d'une connaissance *de la foi*, il la vit *déjà* maintenant. La première édition met le poids sur la réalité présente, fondée sur l'événement pascal passé, la seconde met le poids sur l'attente nichée au cœur de cette réalité qui est fondée *in futurum resurrectionis*. En ce qui concerne le commentaire de Rm 6,9 on pourrait dire que la première édition se rapproche plus d'une paraphrase littérale du texte paulinien. Elle est moins attentive à l'ensemble de l'argumentation paulinienne et commente en fonction de ce qui se présente au niveau du verset pris pour lui-même. Dans la seconde édition, le commentaire présente un plus grand degré de réflexivité critique et fait de cette réflexivité une caractéristique fondamentale du lecteur modèle. Cette réflexivité est organisée autour de l'articulation sémiotique de la mort sur la croix, de la résurrection et de la foi. Cette articulation est également présente dans la première édition, mais elle y est moins mise en avant ; elle est présente là où le texte paulinien la mentionne.

On pourrait dire que la première édition du commentaire de Rm 6,9 invite son lecteur à être saisi par la force de la réalité annoncée par le texte paulinien. Cette force a aussi une importante dimension critique : par cette force, la vie sous le péché apparaît comme une *impossibilité*. On ne peut que répondre « non » aux questions rhétoriques des v. 1 et 15. Ce n'est pas parce qu'on est sous la grâce que l'on peut se donner au péché. Cette vie-là se trouve définitivement *derrière*. « Nous le savons en effet : ressuscité des morts, Christ ne meurt plus ; la mort sur lui n'a plus d'empire » (Rm 6,9). Ici cette affirmation est *le point de départ* d'une différence qualitative infinie entre deux vies irréconciliables et c'est dans le contraste entre ces deux vies que se constitue l'identité du lecteur. Dans la première édition, cette réalité semble pouvoir parler d'elle-même, et dans l'économie du commentaire elle inaugure pour elle-même une nouvelle section de commentaire.

Là où la première édition renvoie simplement au caractère « d'au-delà » de la réalité objective qui marque la rupture entre l'ancien Adam et le nouvel Adam, la seconde édition opère une restructuration du texte du commentaire : c'est sous la condition de la foi (v. 8) qu'il faut lire l'affirmation du v. 9 : « si nous sommes morts avec Christ, nous croyons que nous vivrons aussi avec lui », et c'est uniquement ainsi que le lecteur modèle peut lui aussi affirmer que le Christ res-

suscité ne meurt plus. Ce «savoir» *par* la résurrection de Jésus, est le savoir de la foi, celui qui trouve sa limite humaine dans la mort de Jésus sur la croix.

4 L'exercice de la liberté

Dans le cadre des extraits analysés ici, la concentration sur l'événement pascal vise à faire de l'événement de la réconciliation – Dieu qui s'est fait proche de nous – la base pour la conscience de soi du sujet libre. Cette base est identifiée avec la foi par le biais de la réflexion théologique. Dans la première édition, ce sujet est placé dans un mouvement de croissance organique, présenté de manière objective.³² Dans la seconde, la participation du sujet à ce mouvement se fait au travers de l'interprétation de la crucifixion du Christ en tant qu'elle mène à l'interprétation du *soi* dont l'origine est donnée avec l'événement physique du baptême. Ce mouvement d'interprétation est celui de la foi, dont l'impulsion est donnée dans la résurrection. L'identité du crucifié-ressuscité est présentée comme l'identité du sujet qui est constitué dans son existentialité propre par le baptême et qui accède à la compréhension de soi-même par la réflexion théologique ainsi exécutée.³³ Ce moment de réflexivité théologique est présenté comme la condition épistémologique de la foi et ainsi comme la condition de l'existence de celui et celle à *qui* l'épître aux Romains s'adresse, selon la réinterprétation qu'en propose le *Römerbrief* de Barth.³⁴

La concentration sur la mise en œuvre de la «théologie pratique» de Barth ne doit en revanche pas masquer la productivité des symboles et des signes employés dans ce processus. La foi, la crucifixion et la résurrection ne sont en effet pas des signifiants vides de sens dans le projet de Barth, de simples porteurs d'une mise en œuvre pratique du sujet transcendantal. Eux-mêmes sont porteurs de multiples strates de significations – que ce soient celles de leur contexte de production initial, ou celles qui ont résulté de leur réception dans l'histoire du christianisme et de l'Occident. La spécificité de la pragmatique de la liberté que présente et propose le *Römerbrief* est qu'elle s'exécute *via* la mise en jeu des potentialités sémantiques de ces signes particuliers – la réflexivité de la foi et l'objectivité du mouvement de la liberté faisant d'ailleurs partie de ces

32 Pfeleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 296 – 98.

33 Pfeleiderer, *Karl Barths praktische Theologie*, 354 – 59.

34 Il ne faut pas oublier ce qui a été présenté plus haut au sujet des objectifs de Barth dans l'écriture du *Römerbrief* : il s'agit ici de constituer une avant-garde théologique. C'est un texte à tendance élitiste. Il ne faudrait donc pas le comprendre immédiatement comme une affirmation doctrinale, au sens où seraient exclus de la foi celles et ceux qui n'opéreraient pas ce geste.

potentialités. Autrement dit, les *signes* employés par Barth dans son commentaire affectent et orientent fondamentalement la constitution du sujet de la liberté, sans pour autant clore une fois pour toutes ce qui peut être dit et fait avec ces *signes* – c'est une liberté «au carré». La réécriture du commentaire en si peu de temps et les altérations que l'on peut observer entre les deux éditions exemplifient précisément cette possibilité propre à la liberté du sujet théologique – c'est particulièrement marquant pour la place accordée à la «foi» dans le déploiement du commentaire.

Ceci nous donne un indice de l'héritage que lègue le *Römerbrief* de Karl Barth pour la théologie du 21^e siècle. Le geste théologique que propose Barth est en fait un exercice de la liberté. Le renoncement explicite à l'autorité d'un système scientifique (historique, philosophique, empirique, etc.) pour le développement du propos théologique ne se fait pas à l'encontre de l'émancipation moderne du sujet ou à l'encontre du projet scientifique comme tel, mais à la faveur de l'affirmation de la «personne» du théologien et de la posture qui lui est liée. À la suite de Karl Barth, la théologie ne se construit pas au travers du respect scrupuleux de l'état actuel des règles du discours scientifique, mais au travers de la performativité de la parole (écrite ou orale) et du type de réflexivité que celle-ci assume au sein de la communication intersubjective – le contexte pouvant être celui du politique, du scientifique, du religieux ou autre. En ce sens, ce que le *Römerbrief* annonce est la possibilité d'une théologie qui fait de la «personne» qu'est le théologien ou la théologienne un moment incontournable de l'exercice théologique comme tel.

La comparaison effectuée dans ce travail vise à montrer que la spécificité de cette configuration de la théologie est tributaire des *signes* qui ont été employés dans la constitution de la subjectivité, ou de la posture théologienne : Christ, la crucifixion, la résurrection, la foi, etc. Tant l'ancrage que la radicalisation de la réflexivité théologienne se fait précisément autour d'un jeu sémiotique précis. L'héritage que Karl Barth lègue à une théologie chrétienne au 21^e siècle se trouverait alors peut-être dans l'encouragement à exercer cette liberté par le fait de «jouer» avec ces *signes*, de mettre en œuvre leurs potentialités sémantiques et au travers de chaque itération du jeu découvrir plus avant ce qu'est l'exercice de la liberté de cette «personne» que le théologien se découvre être *coram deo*, du fait de «jouer» avec ces signes.

5 Conclusion

Dans cet article, j'ai proposé une analyse comparative des commentaires de Karl Barth sur Rm 6,9 au travers des deux éditions de son *Römerbrief*. Cette analyse a

été contextualisée à partir de l'interprétation de la théologie de Karl Barth proposée par Georg Pfleiderer – celle-ci est en effet le mieux comprise comme une « théologie pratique », où la pragmatique de l'expression théologique est alignée sur l'intention théologique proposée par l'auteur.

La comparaison a pu préciser plus avant l'un des aspects qui différencie les deux éditions du *Römerbrief* : l'explicitation des conditions épistémologiques de la foi comme *moment* du commentaire lui-même et de la subjectivité qu'il vise à générer vient remplacer, dans la seconde édition, la description directe de la *réalité* de la foi mise en avant dans la première édition. La comparaison a également permis de souligner la continuité de la proposition de Barth entre les deux éditions par rapport aux motifs scripturaires investis pour figurer l'action de Dieu. Le théologien chrétien trouve la figure de sa propre identité dans la personne du Christ crucifié et ressuscité et reconnaît qu'il n'accède à cette figure qu'au travers de la foi, telle qu'elle est ressaisie subjectivement par le geste théologique. Ces motifs opèrent ainsi comme autant de *signes* structurants pour la posture théologique développée par Barth au travers de son commentaire. La seconde édition met ainsi particulièrement en avant à quel point Barth reformule la tâche de la théologie autour de l'engagement et la formation de cette posture et non plus uniquement sur le développement des *contenus* théoriques de la discursivité théologique.

C'est de cette réorientation de l'horizon pragmatique de la théologie que peut hériter la théologie du 21^e siècle. La réception et la production des « contenus » théologiques devient indissociable de l'habitation d'une certaine posture et d'une certaine *manière* de faire de la théologie. Dans le cadre d'une théologie ainsi comprise le « jeu » avec les signes que propose le témoignage chrétien – notamment ceux qui renvoient à l'événement pascal – devient l'occasion d'un exercice de liberté ; une liberté qui s'atteste au travers de l'épreuve de la parole dans la personnalité de celui qui se trouve convoqué « face à Dieu ».

Andrew J. Peterson

Faith, Love, and Extrinsic Grace in Barth's *Römerbrief*

Pure ethics require – and here we are in complete agreement with Kant – that there should be no mixing of heaven and earth in the sphere of morals.¹

Abstract: At its centenary, Barth's Romans commentary remains underappreciated for its inventive and instructive attempt to dramatically revise longstanding Protestant explanations of the sources and character of graced human action. I argue that these revisions are especially apparent in Barth's early accounts of graced faith and love which come together to form a novel picture of the Christian life. I focus in particular on the promise and limits of Barth's austere account of Christian love. I conclude by offering some reasons to doubt Barth's account of love is well-poised to answer objections put to it regarding the quality of the Christian life and the coherence of Christian responsibility.

1 Introduction

Since the publication of his Romans commentary a century ago, Karl Barth's theological treatments of human agency have attracted critique and defense. Critics worried that Barth heralded a domineering God who ran roughshod over, crowded out, or supplanted humans' agency. In the intervening decades, Barth's defenders have typically sought to set aside these critical worries by pointing to the rich, cooperative vision of covenantal partnership they found in the late volumes of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.

I aim to clarify part of what is at stake in this conversation, albeit somewhat indirectly. I agree in part with the critics and argue that Barth's early theology fails to secure an important sort of graced human action. But importantly, Barth's ethics are neither as flatfooted nor as easily dismissed as his critics often supposed. One helpful lesson to be gleaned from the defenses penned by Barth's admirers is that the difficult questions for Barth's ethics regard the quality and character of human actions within the drama of creation, fall, and redemption, not their bare possibility. This is true even of the early Barth. Still, Barth's often loquacious prose and idiosyncratic terminology burdened

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 432.

these sympathetic defenses with the work of lengthy exegetical reconstruction. What remains less clear is whether Barth's work on human agency gets enough of the details right to fully dispel the criticisms.

In his excellent monograph on Barth's ethics, Gerald McKenny identifies a general area of Barth's ethics worthy of interrogation. Assessing Barth's mature efforts to describe grace's effects on human agency, McKenny offers an instructive judgment. "Our final verdict is an ambivalent one," McKenny states, for Barth's account of graced human action incurs "significant liabilities."² In particular, McKenny worries that "there is the denial, mitigated to be sure, but still in effect, that we can find the good in our visible moral achievements," and we "may legitimately question whether the denial does justice to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives."³

McKenny's observation is instructive in part because Barth's troubles in the Romans commentary derive from his dogged determination to diminish Christians' excessive moral self-confidence. The early Barth does this by revising magisterial Protestant commitments about the nature and extent of the Spirit's indwelling in graced faith and love. In what follows, I argue that this is the underappreciated legacy of Barth's Romans commentary: its inventive and instructive attempt to dramatically revise longstanding Protestant explanations of graced human action.

The chapter proceeds in three parts. First, I set the stage by introducing the early Barth's apocalyptically inflected and eschatologically deferred soteriology. Second, I establish that Barth's early accounts of graced faith and love come together to offer an alternative to magisterial Protestant accounts of grace's indwelling. I argue that Barth's account of faith is roughly standard Protestant inheritance while his account of graced love is starkly novel.⁴ Third, I assess the

² Gerald P. McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 223. McKenny's focus is on Barth's mature account of grace in *Church Dogmatics* IV.1 and especially IV.2. He sees a high degree of continuity between Barth's accounts in the *Church Dogmatics* and the second Romans commentary. I am less sure. Partly because I am more worried than McKenny about the viability of the position adopted in the Romans commentary, I hope that Barth's early and late positions are more discontinuous than McKenny claims. That is a matter I leave aside here. My analysis and criticisms here are aimed entirely at the account Barth presents in the second edition of his Romans commentary. Barth's early and later views may or may not be similar enough for the analysis and criticisms in this paper to raise interesting questions about the cogency of Barth's later view. I make no attempt to take up that work explicitly here.

³ McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace*, 223.

⁴ I examine only faith and love for reasons that will become clear soon, but a similarly profitable reconstruction and evaluation is possible of Barth's account of graced hope.

promise and limits of Barth's proposed soteriology. I argue that Barth's accounts of faith and love put limits on the types of graced human action he can affirm. In particular, I argue that Barth's account dramatically scales back the power of Christian love. I conclude by offering some reasons to doubt Barth's account of love is well-poised to answer objections regarding the quality of the Christian life and the coherence of Christian responsibility.

2 Grace Above, Grace Deferred

In the definitive version of his Romans commentary, Barth's accounts of human agency and saving grace collide within a Protestant soteriological drama of his own creation. While inspired in many ways by the magisterial Protestant theological traditions, Barth's commentary sets out on its own, offering a story of salvation novel both in the main and the details. To appreciate the novelty, ingenuity, and promise of Barth's soteriological revisions, we need to first appreciate the central programmatic features of his Romans commentary. For Barth's account of graced Christian actions – particularly as they are guided by superadded faith and love – will come into view better if we see their place in the wider history of grace as Barth conceives of it.

Barth's soteriology is told in an aggressively apocalyptic register and aims to de-historicize traditional Protestant accounts of salvation. While Protestants before Barth had disagreed on many soteriological details, they agreed that God redeems humans progressively through their lives completing that transformation eschatologically through death, resurrection, and elevation unto perfect life with God. Barth radicalizes salvation by transporting most of grace's transforming effects up above and beyond history. In his historiography of Barth's early years, Bruce McCormack helpfully captures the extent to which Barth's commitment to de-historicizing salvation results in deferring our graced renewal to the eschatological remaking of all things. McCormack notes that in the second edition of his Romans commentary Barth abandoned the "process eschatology" of the Reformers "in favor of a radically futurist 'consistent' eschatology according to which the Kingdom of God is understood as that which brings about 'the dissolution of all things, the cessation of all becoming, the passing away of this world's time.'"⁵ I take McCormack to be claiming not just that Barth revised Prot-

⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 208, quoting Barth's 1920 address to the Aarau Student Conference, 'Biblische Fragen, Einsichten und Ausblicke', in *Das Wort Gottes*

estant notions of eschatology – which he no doubt also did – but that Barth's second Romans commentary largely transformed Protestant soteriology *into* eschatology.

For the early Barth, this-worldly life and its history are no longer the primary site of God's progressive salvation of human persons as Protestants had traditionally claimed. Rather, Barth reads Paul as saying that the world's redemption is apocalyptic and cataclysmic, not progressive, both in its timing and its mode. As Barth puts it, "By dissolving us, God establishes us; by killing us, God gives us life. We shall be redeemed, because we shall all be changed – at the sound of the last trump."⁶ Redemption comes patterned after Christ's own resurrection from the dead: after purifying destruction through death, God raises us unto new life. For Barth, this transformation is as assured by Christ's work as it is deferred for us until Christ's return. Christ has accomplished our salvation, yet it remains largely extrinsic to this-worldly humans. For now, salvation remains for us a heralded expectation and promise.

At first blush, both Barth's apocalyptic register and his eschatological deferral of salvation appear to bear little resemblance to classical Protestant soteriology. But I take these distinctive features of Barth's early soteriology to be avant-garde modifications to Protestant soteriology motivated by Barth's own ultra-Protestant commitments. What makes Barth's apocalyptic and eschatological innovations recognizably Protestant?

For starters, Barth's soteriology assumes a traditional account of forensic justification. Like Calvin and Luther before him, Barth reads Paul as proclaiming that Christ's resurrection from the dead places us at a crossroad, a KRISIS point. Human existence here and now is hemmed in – on the one side by ungodliness and rebellion, on the other by God's judgment that our reconciliation has been achieved in Jesus. By his death and resurrection, Jesus overcomes our rebellion and brings peace with God. Barth finds that Paul describes God's justifying work in forensic terms. Christ's atoning sacrifice renders us righteous before God. "We

und die Theologie, 88; English translation: "Biblical Questions, Insights, and Vistas," in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, transl. Amy Marga (London-New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 90.

⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 61. Barth later attempts to moderate this impulse, writing: "Judgement is not annihilation; by it all things are established. Cleansing is not a process of emptying; it is an act of fulfilment. God has not forsaken humanity; but God is true." (79) But later still, Barth revives this earlier, more catastrophic impulse, arguing that redemption occurs analogously to *creatio ex nihilo*, where the new person and new world God remakes "neither emerges from what we know, nor is [...] a development of it." (102) There is some tension here in Barth's thinking, but the catastrophic and apocalyptic line of thought is more dominant and internally consistent.

have peace with God,” Barth says, “because He is just, and because He justifies.”⁷ By virtue of Christ’s vicarious work and representative mediation, God issues a saving declaration; “God pronounces us, God’s enemies, to be God’s friends.”⁸ Our newfound standing before God is achieved objectively – which is to say, presently and actually but apart from our inward transformation. In fact, our just standing before God is accomplished despite our ongoing sin and our ignorance of our God’s saving work. Accordingly, justified humans are curious creatures. God declares us adopted children and just friends by virtue of Christ’s work but without regard for the quality of our intrinsic character, external actions, or social relationships. This side of our resurrection, these remain mired in sin. Nonetheless our redeemed status before God endures, and we are, as Luther famously put it, *simil iustus et peccator*.

From here, Barth departs from his Protestant inheritance by radicalizing it, broadly extending the extrinsic logic of Protestant justification across soteriology as a whole. Magisterial Protestants agreed with Augustinian Christians of the preceding centuries that God’s grace becomes efficacious in us by its communication to this-worldly humans through the Spirit’s indwelling. Grace comes upon us as creatures of a certain kind with particular epistemic and volitional powers. Both are marred by sin. Neither can be renewed without the Spirit’s gracious healing. So, to minds darkened by sin and unruly wills clinging to lesser goods, the Spirit’s grace brings transforming knowledge of God and fledgling but motivating love for God above all things. No doubt this transformation happens only in part this side of resurrection, but by the Spirit’s indwelling it happens really and intrinsically, enabling Christians to grow slowly but surely into greater Christ-likeness.

On the basis of this understanding of grace’s internal renovation of our epistemic and volitional faculties, magisterial Protestants joined Augustinian Christians in holding that grace empowers Christians to obey God’s commands. Enabled to be doers of the Word, God holds Christians responsible for obeying God’s commands. Protestants and earlier Augustinian Christians agreed that this transformation was partial and ongoing, its completion never reached this side of resurrection. Our sinful desires remain profoundly powerful often overriding grace’s attempts to direct us to do the good. So too our knowledge of God is limited now – dark and dim – but eventually we will see God face to face. Still, by the Spirit’s sanctifying power and the instruction and sustenance received through preach-

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 107.

8 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 93.

ing and the sacraments, magisterial Protestants thought graced humans were capable of special moral activities and growth in inward righteousness.⁹

The early Barth is profoundly skeptical about the practical upshot of the Augustinian consensus, and he doubts that Christians are sufficiently renovated by grace to do the good God wills. The Romans commentary contains Barth's early attempt to offer a novel and instructive alternative. Barth amends his Protestant inheritance predictably by offering alternative accounts of grace's indwelling. Extending the logic of justification as captured in Luther's *simul* to cover not only sanctification but all of this-worldly history, Barth offers an account of grace whereby faith provides the epistemic transformation required to regard ourselves as Christians but love fails to bring the transformation which would enable us to live as such.¹⁰ I turn now to the details of Barth's accounts of faith and love.

9 Calvin argues that since sin has doubly weakened and corrupted our ability to obey God by harming both our intellects and wills, we must say that God miraculously heals both faculties by grace if we are to avoid Pelagianism (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.12 and 19–27). He then argues that this transformation must take place at least partially on this side of the resurrection, since “As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us” (*Institutes*, III.1.1). Luther likewise argues that the “fruit and consequence” of our moral transformation “into Christ’s likeness” is merited by Christ’s alien righteousness, “the basis, the cause, the source of our own actual righteousness.” He argues God heals the soul’s faculties progressively, first by righteousness “instilled in us without our works by grace alone,” which then graciously enables us to “work with that first and alien righteousness.” These two movements of grace produce good fruit; grace “inwardly draws us to Christ,” progressively removes our proclivity to sin, and drives us outward into good works of “love to one’s neighbor.” *Luther’s Works vol. 31*, eds. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 298–300.

10 George Hunsinger has helpfully argued that Barth’s extension of Luther’s *simul* to the doctrine of sanctification is a controlling formal motif of Barth’s mature account. I agree and here extend this observation to Barth’s Romans commentary. Hunsinger also advances an interesting and constructive thesis for how to read Barth’s reworking of the *simul* as reconciling the best of Luther and Calvin. I am less convinced by the historical and constructive prongs of this proposal, though Hunsinger’s argument concerns Barth’s mature view in *Church Dogmatics IV* and therefore lies beyond the focus of this essay. See George Hunsinger, “A Tale of Two Simultaneities,” *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 18, no. 3 (2002): 316–338.

3 Grace Within, Grace Without: Faith and Love

3.1 Grace Within: Faith and Identity

Begin with faith, for if we were to simply examine Barth's innovative transformation of Protestant love, it would be tempting to conclude that Barth largely leaves traditional Protestant soteriology behind. This reading would miss the extent to which Barth's revised account of grace's transformation of our volitional powers depends on a roughly traditional account of grace's transformation of our epistemic powers by faith.

I say *roughly* traditional because the programmatic apocalyptic and eschatological commitments outlined above do distance Barth from magisterial Protestant accounts of faith in some important respects. Magisterial Protestant accounts of justification and sanctification produce an identity problem – a problem magisterial Protestants worked on using the medieval scholastic language of *personae*. Personas are relational. They specify the identity born by a party to a particular relationship. Each of us bears many personas – e.g. parent, friend, colleague, citizen, stranger, and so on. Most of these are compatible with a wide range of other personas, since most of our relationships aren't exclusive of others. But in Protestant soteriology, graced humans simultaneously bear opposite, seemingly contradictory personas before God. By virtue of their intrinsic righteousness, they are reformed sinners but sinners nonetheless. But by virtue of Christ's righteousness extrinsically denominated to them, Christians are deemed God's friends. In traditional Protestant accounts, faith performs the important function of explaining how Christians can bear these opposite personas. By faith Christians come to know Christ's righteousness and its function in restoring justice between God and humans. But importantly, faith also enables Christians to look upon their own fledgling but real moral reformation and recognize themselves proleptically as the sanctified persons they will be at the sound of the last trump.

Barth adopts much of this magisterial formula and idiom. He agrees that graced humans bear two seemingly contradictory personas, identities, or selves (*die Ichs*) – a justified person obedient to God's will, and a sinner caught in wanton rebellion.¹¹ But because Barth scales back the extent to which grace intrinsi-

¹¹ Hoskyns renders Barth's "das Ich" as "EGO" in the English translation which I prefer not to employ because I find it misleadingly echoes Freudian psychology and distances Barth from both Paul and the Protestant theological tradition. Barth's use of "das Ich" evokes in order to

cally reforms this-worldly humans, he must slightly amend the basis upon which each of these personas obtains. He borrows from Paul's rhetoric and terms the personas borne by this-worldly humans respectively the "old person" and the "new person."¹² For Barth, a graced person is not partially one and partially the other (*partim-partim*), but somehow both of these identities fully at the same time (*totus-totus*) in a relationship of complex dialectical tension. How so?

In good Protestant fashion, Barth relies on faith to do much of the needed work. Flowery ocular metaphors dominate Barth's descriptions of faith: "Having died, that is, to the flesh. May this invisible vision be ours! May we perceive that we are without doubt held and moved and directed by the sure and triumphant freedom of God!"¹³ On Barth's telling, faith is a gracious gift, an effect of God's revealing activity which directs and enables perceptual activities we are otherwise incapable to perform. Knowledge follows. Barth denies that faith can be the product of creaturely media: "Faith is not revealed to us by *flesh and blood*: no one can communicate it to herself or to anyone else."¹⁴ Faith comes only from above, only from God's gracious abundance, for "there are no human avenues of approach, no 'way of salvation' [...] no ladder which must first be scaled."¹⁵ Faith imparts a fragile and alien but durable power. By faith, we are capable of knowing the God of Israel and the church. So too, we come to know God's redemptive intercession on our behalf.

As we come to know these things, we also learn of our status among the redeemed friends of God. Transformed by our gracious reorientation to God, faith's effects redound to the way we understand ourselves, to the statuses we regard ourselves as bearing in relation to God. As Barth puts it: "By faith we attain the status of those who have been declared righteous before God. By faith we are what we are not. Faith is the predicate of which the new human is the subject."¹⁶ Faith mediates the status of justified friend by enabling us to regard ourselves as bearing it. By this, Barth does not mean that only the "new person" united to Christ has faith, and here is the touchstone between the objective

revise what the medievals and Reformers called *personae*, and I employ the anglicized form of the Latin term here for "das Ich" to make these comparisons more obvious.

¹² The English translation is also inadequate here, rendering Barth's less troubled use of "der neue/alte Mensch" in the needlessly gendered "the new/old Man." On this point, I have amended the translation freely throughout to the more accurate and less troubled "the new/old Person."

¹³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 239.

¹⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 98.

¹⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 99.

¹⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

and extrinsic salvation accomplished in Jesus and this-worldly humans still mired in sin. Barth holds that this-worldly humans are capable of regarding themselves as the “new person” united to Christ because faith enables *them* to perceive the “new person” they will be.¹⁷ As Barth puts it in the first person: “I am this new subject; because, since faith is the predicate, an identity is established between me and it.”¹⁸ That is, faith is not restricted to post-resurrection life. Faith enables this-worldly humans to actively bear the persona of the “new person.” So Barth concludes that faith allows us to “behold the existential ‘new person’ who lives in God.”¹⁹

That said, faith enables us to bear the persona of the “new person” united to Christ and simultaneously know that the righteousness of that “new person” remains altogether extrinsic to us. Alongside our identity as the “new person” united to Christ, we remain the “old person” dead in sin. What’s more, we are capable of regarding ourselves as such. How so? By faith’s transformation of our perceptive activities, we are capable, Barth thinks, of regarding ourselves as who we are intrinsically and historically. Assessing the quality of our intrinsic character and its external actions, faith enables us to know that we are filled with disordered desires which prompt us to sin. From this vantage, Barth writes that “The new subject, being that which is radically and absolutely ‘other’, must therefore be contrasted with what I am; it is, in fact, what I am not.”²⁰ The “new person” we will be in Christ lives in harmony with God by virtue of her internal righteousness. For this-worldly humans, our further transformation remains an object of hope and promise, not an intrinsic possession. As a result, the “old person” is a persona we regard ourselves as bearing by virtue of faith-directed introspection. Because we remain largely unchanged by grace, the Christian must admit that she and the world “remain what they are”; her “new life must exist ‘beyond’ them.”²¹ Faith directs our acts of knowing enabling us to take up both personas. By faith’s mediation this-worldly humans regard themselves as the “new persons” they are in Christ. So too faith grants a self-critical vantage

17 The subtlety here is easy to miss. Many of Barth’s interpreters have noticed that Barth scales back the extent to which this-worldly humans are transformed by grace. But it is too hasty to conclude that Barth denies all transformation whatsoever. To deny all transformation by grace would make Barth’s account self-defeating, since this-worldly humans at least need the transformation offered by faith in order to regard themselves as united to Christ in the new person.

18 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

19 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 282.

20 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

21 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 195 (trans. lightly revised).

sufficient to enable them to regard themselves as the “old person” enslaved to sin.

In its broad outlines, Barth’s account of faith is classically Protestant. Faith indwells this-worldly humans by the Spirit’s grace. On the basis of Barth’s reworking of the remainder of grace’s this-worldly effects, some of Barth’s early critics supposed he must think of faith as either wholly negative or extrinsic. While Barth’s rhetorical style sometimes provides fodder for such readings, what the above reconstruction of Barth’s view shows is that Barth’s rhetoric often outstrips his material commitments. Look behind the register of Barth’s prose, and one finds that he thinks faith is a product of God’s gracious intervention, that it enables certain human actions which are otherwise impossible, and that it produces graced knowledge of and dispositions toward ourselves and God. As I will argue shortly, the remainder of Barth’s account of grace is highly original. But crucially, Barth’s refashioned account of graced love requires a largely traditional account of faith. If Barth were to deny that faith brought real transformation of our ability to know God, his account would be self-defeating, since it would be impossible to take up the point-of-view his account assumes.

3.2 Grace Without: Love and Tragedy

While the early Barth’s account of faith is largely familiar, his account of love is novel. Where Barth affirmed that faith effectively enables new intellectual activities, he doubts that graced love effectively overhauls our volitional capacities. Instead, Barth departs from his Protestant inheritance by denying that our wills are effectively and progressively reformed by graced love. Still, Barth’s doubts are not as thoroughgoing as they might be. Barth recognizes that if we are to bear the persona of the “new person” united to Christ with hope, we must endorse, desire, and long for that coming union. Barth wants to affirm this much volitional transformation and no more, so he denies that this-worldly recipients of grace are transformed enough to *act* more lovingly, to actually and progressively become this “new person.” This is a complicated position, so let me further specify what I take Barth to affirm.

At the most formal level, Barth distinguishes between true “love” and its earthly semblances.²² Shot through with sin, this-worldly “love” is categorically

²² Barth follows the convention of distinguishing *eros* from *agape*, but he defines each in a novel way. *Eros* stands in for all this-worldly human loving, and it is typically fickle, deceptive,

distinct from the perfect bond which unites Christ and the “new person.” Accordingly, Barth concludes that love for God is impossible here and now absent God’s gracious intervention. “The love of God,” he writes, “is not a particular form of behaviour within the sphere of human competence.”²³ Of course, most magisterial Protestants would have agreed that humans were incapable of loving God apart from God’s gracious intervention, whether because of the limits of human finitude or the corruption of our practical faculties by sin. Barth thinks this too, but he also thinks we remain incapable of effectively loving God even after God’s bestowal of indwelling grace. Incapable of loving God, our alienation from God remains. By faith’s direction, we graced humans know ourselves to be sinners habitually acting as God’s enemies. These unjust acts are the fruit of our sinful desires which run contrary to God’s will. No loving acts executed by our own power emerge to challenge the tyranny of sin. Instead, Barth concludes that “the most sincere, most upright, most deep-seated vigour of *will* remains uncrowned by the performance of *that which is good*.”²⁴

While Barth thinks that “shrink[ing] from a clear recognition that the human will is ‘enslaved’ is profitless,” he nonetheless also realizes he must affirm some transformation of our desires in order to account for the bond faith forms between us and the “new person.”²⁵ If our desires are in no way transformed by grace, we could not rightly regard the knowledge faith imparts. We might come to know but would not properly comprehend and cherish Christ’s sacrifice and God’s gracious gifts. Disposed by sinful desires to hate God and God’s mercies, we would therefore not regard ourselves as the “new person” with hope, nor would we yearn to be united to Christ in the new world recreated and redeemed by God. If our desires remain entirely untransformed, faith oddly undermines our salvation by enabling our further alienation, since by faith we are confronted with God’s gracious offer of renewed friendship, an offer we are habitually disposed to reject.

Barth wards off this dire possibility by affirming the transformation of our second-order desires – our desires about the kind of first-order desires we

and domineering. *Agape*, by contrast, is that love which regards others as the “new person” they are in Christ. While Barth often seems at pains to give *agape* a key role in this-worldly politics, he eventually concludes that it does not enter time and therefore is proper only to eschatological life with God. See Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 450–501.

²³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 318.

²⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 264.

²⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 83.

wish to have, the kind of desiring agents we wish to be.²⁶ As Barth puts it, “*To will is present with me*. But what is meant by *to will*? It means, presumably, to strive after, desire, demand, question, seek, pray, knock; in other words, it constitutes the theme and purpose of all preaching and of all pastoral work.”²⁷ Here Barth affirms that by grace’s renovation, we wish to be the sort of people who love God, obey God’s commands, and treat our neighbors as ourselves. We endorse the goodness of our coming redemption, and we desire to be the “new person” united to Christ even before our purification and perfection by death and resurrection.

Yet, tragedy abounds, for Barth thinks that grace renovates our second-order desires but proceeds no further. Accordingly, we remain incapable of loving God and neighbor because our renovated second-order desires short-circuit, failing to effectively produce acts of love. Our actions consistently betray God and the “new person” we hope to become. Barth laments:

I cannot identify my will to do good with the good itself. The characteristic mark of the good is that it persistently demands realization, for action is the end of knowledge and of will. But this end is foreign to me. I do not practise what is good; I perform all manner of evil that I would not.²⁸

Our actions run contrary to our renovated second-order desires, and we are “intolerably both at once.”²⁹ As Barth dramatically and personally summarizes the point in the first person, “I am he that wills and he that does not perform [...]. When my will is most steadfast, it does but remind me that the good is – not in me.”³⁰ Despite our desire to be the “new person” and to love God as the “new person” does, Barth insists that graced persons cannot effectively love God. Put more precisely, Barth denies that graced persons can effectively execute their intention to act lovingly toward God. Fledgling dispositions emerge but are everywhere ineffectual. Alienation from ourselves and God is the natural result:

26 For the distinction between first and second-order desires and the importance of their harmony for whole-heartedness, see Harry G. Frankfurt, “The Dear Self,” in *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Barth does not use the language of first- and second-order desires, but I employ it here because I take Barth to be committed to the substance of the distinction that Frankfurt names.

27 Barth, 264. The catalogue Barth introduces here contains both dispositions and actions. For reasons which will become clearer later, it is best to read Barth here as naming the aspirational intention to execute each listed action, not a list of attainable graced actions.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 265.

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 265.

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 265.

“Our whole behaviour proves us to be in no way at one with ourselves; and for this reason, our relation to God is a disturbed relation.”³¹

Why Barth thinks our graced second-order desires are always ineffectual is unclear. Two explanations are available to him. He does not clearly pick one. Barth could deny that our first-order desires are transformed by grace. If first-order desires directly move the will and our first-order desires remain entirely sinful, it follows that we would never execute tangible acts of love toward God. We would, of course, remain positively disposed toward God, eager to be the sort of people who act with love toward God. But we would remain incapable of acting in the way we desire.

Another explanation is also available to Barth. He could affirm a limited transformation of our first-order desires but maintain that these are always and everywhere defeasible by our stronger sinful desires, which remain intact. If grace produces robust second-order desires but only feeble first-order desires and leaves our robust sinful first-order desires unreformed, our sinful inclinations could plausibly always win out, producing sinful acts we nevertheless despise.

Barth does not clearly opt for one of these explanations, and either is compatible with his insistence that whatever transformation grace brings to our desires, our wills remain “uncrowned by the performance of *that which is good*.”³² In either case, Barth denies that grace effectively transforms our practical ability to love God. At best, we wish we actively loved God and perhaps we even intend to, but we know we do not actually love God. By faith we know that we should, that we owe God love in responsive gratitude for Christ’s sacrifice, that love would enable us to share intimate friendship with God. But sin remains too powerful, and our further transformation by grace is deferred to our resurrection unto perfect life with God. The limited transformation afforded to this-worldly humans by grace enables us to hope and yearn for that coming transformation, but it also funds profound despondency about this-worldly life, since as Barth puts it, “There is no bond of union between me, as I am, and God.”³³

³¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 266.

³² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 264.

³³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 260.

4 Responsibility, Intentionality, and Christian Love

In the preceding sections, I argued that Barth's early soteriology is bold and innovative. In this final section, I want to consider how well these innovations fare. Are they helpful and worth endorsing? I doubt they are. To explain why, I first note a problem that Barth's innovations cause: Barth's constriction of graced love makes it difficult for him to account for Christian responsibility. If Barth's soteriological innovations cannot solve this problem, they seem ethically unpromising. I then consider Barth's response to this problem, his attempt to affirm Christian acts of love caused by miraculous divine intervention. I argue that this attempt is unsuccessful and misguided, since it relies on incoherent notions of intentionality and responsibility.

By affirming our epistemic transformation by grace while scaling back the practical effectiveness of graced love, Barth's account of the Christian life generates a dual problem. On Barth's view, Christians find themselves aware of their responsibility before God. By faith, Christians encounter God's imperatives and know themselves to be subject to them. So Barth writes, "Grace is the power of obedience; it is theory and practice, conception and birth; it is the indicative which carries with it a categorical imperative; it is the call, the command, the order, which cannot be disobeyed."³⁴ And yet because of love's ineffective renewal of our volitional capacities, Christians remain incapable of responding to the call and obeying God's commands. The result puts Christians in the tragic position of being called to responsibility, equipped with the desire to answer the call, and yet being unable to effectively carry out their intended response.

What does Barth say to ward off the tragedy and despondency ushered in by the limitations he puts on grace's this-worldly effects? Are we simply left to yearn for perfect life with God while trapped within the tragedy of this-worldly life? If we are incapable of graced action, of effectively becoming better people by grace's aid, is grace's transformation of our knowing and desiring a burden? Does grace enable a despondency about the limits of this-worldly life to which non-graced humans might not be entitled? The tension is only amplified by Barth's acknowledgment of the problem and his insistence nonetheless that grace encounters us in the imperative: Be sanctified! Do the good! Love God! Obey God's commands! Does God command graced humans to do what God knows they cannot because God fails to heal and aid them sufficiently? Or as

³⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 207.

Barth puts the questions to himself: "How can I obey a call which has emerged from beyond the boundary of my existence? *I am carnal*: never can flesh become spirit, for that would mean the resurrection of the flesh."³⁵ And again: "Are we then, nevertheless, left with existence as that which lies outside and not within us? Does our freedom in God still remain slavery?"³⁶

Barth's answer? "So far as we are people of this world, at best, religious people, the answer is 'Yes,'" tragedy abounds.³⁷ Or so it would be, but a miracle occurs. We love God. We do the good. We obey God's commands in gratitude for God's merciful forgiveness and Christ's sacrifice. How so? Barth argues that "in so far as we are – miracle beyond all miracles! – identified with the 'new person' in Christ, 'very human and very God', the answer is 'No,'" graced life is not inaccessible to us. Our identification with the "new Person" takes place in this-worldly human actions wherein God intervenes to produce the acts of love we wish to effect but cannot. Acts of love remain beyond even our transformed capacities, but God helps bridge the gap between our desires and our capacity.

How so? Barth argues that graced acts of love are produced by God's miraculous causal intervention. Barth summarizes this view in a passage worth quoting at some length:

Nevertheless, even there the miracle may take place; for the light of a sobriety which is not of this world, which is not of humans, the light of the demand which God makes upon us, may shine forth through a secondary act of human ethics [...] and [...] then God will be glorified in the full humanity of the person of this world. This is the Miracle; but its achievement lies beyond our competence. We are competent, however, so to conduct ourselves and so to recollect ourselves as to live mindful of how utterly empty our existence is, even upon some *high place*, if the Miracle does not occur.³⁸

Notice that Barth does not contradict the highly circumscribed account of love examined above. Because our incapacity remains, God intervenes to produce those acts we intend but remain impotent to effect. Notably, Barth thinks God's causal intervention produces a *human action*, not just a *happening* or an *event*. This category of human action is *sui generis*, since "love toward God is an occurrence, a being and having and doing of humans, which has its origin at every moment in Godself, and which must therefore be sought and found only in God."³⁹ Barth explicitly denies that God's causal contribution in produc-

35 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 260.

36 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 296.

37 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 296.

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 440.

39 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 324.

ing human acts of love is mediated “concretely as the first of a series of temporal occurrences.”⁴⁰ Rather, God’s causal intervention is direct and uniquely efficacious, producing a material act of love of which the human agent knows herself to be incapable. “The ethical factor in human conduct,” Barth argues, “depends upon the light which shines in it: it depends, that is to say, since we can here speak only negatively, upon humans being overcome.”⁴¹ As a result, Barth concludes that the “person who loves God can never ask ‘Is it I?’ or ‘Is it Thou?’”⁴² It is always Thou: human acts of love toward God exist, even in this-worldly life, but they are entirely produced by God’s miraculous intervention. Or as Barth again writes, “Reality [...] knows but one person, and I, and not some other, am that person. It is one person that wills and does not perform; one person that does not will, and yet performs.”⁴³

Barth is clear that his resort to miraculous divine intervention redounds to the nature of love and of graced humans. If love is the result of God’s unique causal production of our actions, then love is a curious thing. As Barth puts it, an act of creaturely love which God alone causes is not a “glorious achievement,” nor is love itself a “possession,” or a “property” inhering durably within Christians.⁴⁴ Rather, acts of love crop up where the Spirit blows.

People who love God by God’s occasional and miraculous intervention are likewise odd. Knowing themselves to be moved to actions which exceed their capacities, graced humans are aware that divinely caused acts of love do not add up to build a progressive life of sanctification. “There is no such thing,” Barth argues, “as the ‘building up’ by humans of an adequate ethical life, not even if the quality of their moral behaviour were so sublime that it might be claimed that the will of God had been united with the human will.”⁴⁵ The resulting account of this-worldly Christian life, Barth concedes, involves an odd and dissatisfying account of love. He shrugs off this worry, claiming that it “is not, however, within our competence to provide a less restless and more satisfying answer to the question – How ought people to be lovers of God?”⁴⁶ If God redeems the

40 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 324. That is, Barth rejects the magisterial Protestant account, which affirms God miraculously causes our sanctified acts of love by virtue of mediated gifts of grace which durably inhere within the soul.

41 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434.

42 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 324.

43 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 266.

44 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 322.

45 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

46 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 322.

world in such a way as to render this-worldly love unsatisfying and restless, Barth thinks that is God's prerogative.

These commitments help Barth in a few respects while hurting him in others. They let him temper the extent to which this-worldly life is grim and despondent. Real material acts of love for God exist even here and now. They are caused directly and solely by God, but they are material acts which involve our bodies and carry effects on our relationships with one another and with God. But these commitments are also costly. If we desire to act lovingly toward God and know ourselves to be incapable of effectively acting so, we must constantly hope for God's intervention. Our own continuing acts of sin are evidence of God's non-intervention. If sin is as widespread as Barth imagines, we are left to hope for an intervention which seems rare and to trust in a God infrequently inclined to mercifully temper the despondent and grim nature of this-worldly life. Barth's account of miraculous intervention successfully gets goodness and love into our fallen world, but it fails to ward off much despondency about this-worldly life.

Or perhaps better, Barth's resort to miraculous divine intervention successfully gets Christian love and responsibility into our fallen world if it is coherent. I worry it is not, since I fail to see how the sorts of acts Barth describes could be intelligibly regarded as *our* acts. Many happenings or events which involve people are not human actions. Actions are distinguished from happenings or events by intentions. Barth's account is promising in that he affirms that grace brings reformation of our second-order desires sufficient to enable us to form intentions to do the good and to love God. But he also insists that we know our intentions are thwarted by our stronger sinful desires. We form intentions, but we also know they are defeated by stronger base inclinations.

The problem is that we commonly ascribe specific actions to people only where we justifiably take them to have causally produced an act they intended. This is not to assert that intentions only have a moral valence if they are executed in action. We commonly also hold one another responsible for intentions which have not been executed or are attempted but unsuccessful. We distinguish between murder and conspiracy to commit murder; we arrest thieves even when they fail in their acts of stealing. If this is right, Barth's account of divinely caused acts of love is incoherent. Our responsibility to God and one another for acting with Christian love requires that the acts of love be *ours*, but on Barth's view they are in fact God's acts. God intervenes to perform the outward appearance of acts we ineffectively intend. In realizing God's own intention, God acts by means of us. By grace, we may well endorse God's intervention; we may wish for God to be loved. We may rejoice that we have been involved in what God considers an act of love. But when we do so, we endorse God's acting in ways we know we cannot. As a result, we cannot appropriate the resulting material effects as

our own acts. We intend to execute self-caused acts of love, and this remains undone. If this is right, miraculous acts of love are not *our* acts. Perhaps they are God's acts of loving Godself by means of us. Perhaps we can endorse God's loving Godself in this way. But they are not our own acts of love for God, and so they do not fulfill our obligations to love God and one another.

5 Conclusion

At the start, I enlisted McKenny's help identifying an area of Barth's ethics worthy of interrogation, one McKenny found burdened by "significant liabilities."⁴⁷ Despite these worries about Barth's mature efforts, McKenny goes on to conclude triumphantly of Barth's treatments of graced human action: "Barth secures the stability of ethics in Protestant theology" and provides "at last [...] a viable alternative to the Augustinian tradition."⁴⁸ McKenny's judgments and conclusions regard Barth's later works which I haven't considered here. Still, it's notable that our conclusions are nearly opposite one another. In my view, Barth's Romans commentary offers a bold and novel account of graced human action, one worthy of serious attention. But I have argued that Barth's key innovations are also his soteriology's most significant weaknesses. If I am right, Barth's early efforts constitute an unstable and unattractive alternative to the Augustinian tradition, and Barth's mature efforts will succeed to the extent to which he addresses these weaknesses.

⁴⁷ McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace*, 223.

⁴⁸ McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace*, 292.

Mark W. Elliott

Barth (1919 – 1922) and the Power of the Gospel (Romans 1:16 – 17)

Abstract: The verses (Romans 1:16–17) which speak of the power of the gospel are arguably programmatic in Paul’s letter and for his theology as a whole, and even more so for Barth’s Römerbrief commentary, in its essentially two very different editions. Something of the road from the 1919 to the 1922 editions needs to and will be said, but perhaps focusing in detail on Barth’s exegesis of these two verses will allow one to see how a theological shift in a doctrine of revelation towards a ‘negative’ theology was preceded by establishing that the Gospel is about power rather than words (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:20, correspondingly about the Kingdom). Reading the two editions synoptically or ‘binoptically’ might allow for a less abstract view of the gospel and one rooted in the Incarnation itself than if Romans II were allowed simply to supersede Romans I, even if the remaining appeal to ‘experience’ in the earlier version is understandably to come under suspicion and require a certain ‘distancing’.

1 Introduction

How is one to freshen Barth up, how to lift him up out of the morass of marginal and interlinear glosses that have accompanied many of his works over the last few decades, rendering the one whose work once seemed so fresh and so radical just so overfamiliar? Well, one could attempt this by reading Barth in a *dogmen-geschichtliche* connection as part of a historical flow of theology, usually from Schleiermacher through to those Barth himself influenced such as Ebeling and Jüngel or Torrance. Some recent Barth interpreters who have put Barth in his place, as it were include Bruce McCormack and Christophe Chalamet. Another option is to follow the interest in the reception of his work in various places and nations with notable local colouring, and then take account of the continuing stream of Barth scholarship: although these last two (Barth-reception and Barth-scholarship) easily merge into each other. Whatever the merits of the Barth Industry, Karl himself might have said that this is to miss the whole point if his reader did not take a further step. He would lead his reader to a place somewhere between the biblical text and the *Sache* itself, not at three removes from the text with the focus on Barth, Barthianism, his devotees, his critics, second and by now third generations of them. After all, the reader is called

to “rethink the thoughts of the text after it, that is, to come to terms with it until the wall between the first and sixteenth century becomes transparent [...]”¹ That concerns the biblical text, and one is to think with the author not about the author (Paul). How much more the need to see through Barth’s own self-effacing commentary.

So our chief concern will be a brief account of a specific part of Barth, namely his commentary on a verse or so, that is Romans 1:16–17, a ‘key’ text of strategic importance. Yet, having said that we want to focus in on Barth and the text, there is the opposite but equal temptation to just ignore contemporary, diligent scholarship that would helpfully map out his intellectual context, or to mention such scholarship only to dismiss it. Instead, realising that humanities research is a matter of teamwork, we should attend to at least some of it, even if the Barth industry has spewed forth as much hot air as brought forth serviceable product. To take one example of usefulness, Richard Burnett informs us that in the preface to *Römerbrief* II, where Barth offers a defence of his exegetical method, he attacked biblical scholars for too readily handing over the theological matter to Practical Theologians, for ‘application.’² The issue was in part whether Systematic Theology was being passed over in that handover from Bible to church life. I have to confess that on first reading I did not see this issue in the second preface, so I am grateful to Burnett and the rest of the guild for drawing my attention to it. Nevertheless, it is Barth’s exegesis of the biblical text that will occupy most of my interest here.³

2 Getting Some Context

For the Barth of 1921–22, and possibly since at least 1918, theology was not about the historical explanation of theologians in history, but was rather a conceptual effort (*Anstrengung des Begriffs*) rooted in and for the present. “If I have a

1 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), xi.

2 Richard Burnett, *Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 55. Burnett follows his teacher Bruce McCormack in holding that the break from Schleiermacher in 1915 meant that from that point onwards there would be a combination of dialectic and analogy in Barthian theologising.

3 Translations of the 1919 edition *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985) are my own. Also Hermann Schmidt’s *Vorwort* from the 1985 edition – here I have used but also in places altered the translation by Edwyn C. Hoskyns as re-issued by Oxford University Press in 1968.

‘system’, it consists in that which Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative difference’ between time and eternity [...].”⁴ If the present time were to be addressed from the standpoint of eternity it could not be just by hearing wise or interesting things from a different historical epoch, like the abiding message of a ‘Classic’ or some such. The Gospel did not ‘belong’ to any one generation. Also, the priority of exegesis over hermeneutics was stated. If prescient, Barth might have said “beware the Gadamerian trap!” of the development of hermeneutics as a thing in itself, whatever Gadamer’s intentions. For a systematic theologian, Barth is distinctive for his insistence on exegetical ‘hand to hand combat,’ and there are more than 2000 examples of detailed exegesis of specific passages in his *Church Dogmatics* alone. In his approach to Romans he is uncritical of Paul altogether.⁵

The Barth who had broken with Schleiermacher halfway through the Great War was clear about Apostolic authority through Apostolic transcending of time:

My complete attention was directed to seeing through the historical into the spirit of the bible which is the eternal spirit. What once happened of import is also of import now and no mere fluke or quirk, that stands in immediate connection with that of import that happened. Our questions are, if we have rightly understood, the questions of Paul and the answers of Paul, when their light illuminates us, must be our answers.⁶

It is a matter of looking backwards, only to look upwards. Yet, having turned to look backward, one could rightly call this a conversation between the wisdom of then and now, yet partly mediated through the intermediaries who were doing the same listening to Paul. In any case Barth sensed that many people had had enough of being spectators of Paul from the height of scientific objectivity and wanted to accompany the Apostle to hear his voice as new – as Barth himself had. So already in 1919 there was this already-mentioned refusal to separate

⁴ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xiii.

⁵ It was Barth in 1923 who told Harnack that not to understand Jesus after the flesh meant always looking to locate a part in the whole, even Paul to the Old Testament. Bultmann thought differently, as in a letter to Baumgartner: “Die Texte ‘so wie sie vorliegen, sich jenem Vorher und Nachher gegenüber ja gerade *abgrenzen* und etwas *Eigenes* sagen’.” Rudolf Smend, “Karl Barth und Walter Baumgartner. Ein Briefwechsel über das Alte Testament,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche. Beiheft 6* (1986): 240 – 71, 266.

⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, Vorwort [1918], 3: “Aber meine ganze Aufmerksamkeit war darauf gerichtet, durch das Historische *hindurch* zu sehen in den Geist der Bibel, der der ewige Geist ist. Was einmal ernst gewesen ist, das ist es auch heute noch und was heute ernst ist und nicht bloß Zufall und Schrulle [quirk], das steht auch in unmittelbarem Zusammenhang mit dem, was einst ernst gewesen ist. Unsere Fragen sind, wenn wir uns selber recht verstehen, die Fragen des Paulus, und des Paulus Antworten müssen, wenn ihr Licht uns leuchtet, unsere Antworten sein.”

New Testament exegesis from practical theology. This is exegesis for or even as proclamation, on the basis of Barth's correspondence in 1916–1918, in a letter to Hermann Schmidt:

A resource discovered: J.T. Beck! As bible expositor simply towering high over his peers [...] I tracked him closely and will follow him in connection with the others from Calvin to Tholuck right up to Kutters' *Gerechtigkeit*, a whole crowd of witnesses! Out of this arose moreover a notebook with annotations, in which I summarised everything in my aphorisms.⁷

He discovered nothing less than a new way of reading the bible, by returning to the old way of proceeding with the bible, in the way the Reformers were used to doing.⁸ This characteristic might reinforce the widespread assumption that there was nothing exegetically new under the sun.

3 To the Sources 1: *Römerbrief I (1919)*

When one looks at the 1919 commentary itself on Romans 1:16–17, from the outset Barth insists: “it is *power* coming out from God in the resurrection of Christ from the dead [...] but we have no ideas behind us/in our sails, but the power of all powers, which therefore is also the idea of all ideas: the power of God.”⁹ Jesus did not rise from the dead in order to initiate the history of doctrine (Harnack seems the target here).

It seems clear here that the power comes from the resurrection of Christ. But how can *something preached* itself be ‘power’? Or what kind of identity exists between a liberating sequence of events or effect ‘in Christ’ and the communication

⁷ Letter from Barth to Thurneysen on July 27, 1916, cited by Hermann Schmidt (Vorwort des Herausgebers zu *Der Römerbrief 1919*, x): “Fundgrube entdeckt: J. T. Beck!! Als Bibelerklärer einfach *turmhoch* über der übrigen Gesellschaft [...] Ich bin ihm durch den Römerbrief auf die Spur gekommen und will ihm da nachgehen im Zusammenhang mit den Andern von Calvin bis Tholuck bis auf Kutters ‘Gerechtigkeit’, eine ganze Wolke von Zeugen!! [...] Es entsteht da übrigens ein Heft mit ‘Scholien’, in denen ich Alles in meine Sprüche zusammenfasse.” Cf. also Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf. Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten* (München: Kaiser, 1975), 109.

⁸ “Barth befindet sich, als er den ersten Römerbrief schreibt, in einer Phase tiefgreifender theologischer Umkehr. Er entdeckt nicht weniger als eine neue Art, die Bibel zu lesen. Oder: Er kehrt zurück zu der alten Weise des Umgangs mit der Bibel, wie sie z.B. die Reformatoren geübt haben.” Schmidt, Vorwort des Herausgebers zu *Der Römerbrief 1919*, xvii.

⁹ “Es ist *Kraft* ausgegangen von Gott in der Auferstehung des Christus von den Toten [...] Aber wir haben nicht Ideen hinter uns, sondern die Kraft aller Kräfte, die darum auch die Idee aller Ideen ist: die Kraft Gottes.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 19.

of news about that to people now? Curiously Barth adds: “We stand in the beginnings of this happening and a broad perspective opens out to a situation the freedom of God.”¹⁰ As ‘we’ become part of this story a new perspective opens up: some epistemic improvement follows on an actual one. Barth follows this immediately with: “Now with us! It has to do with believing the power of God, the Pauline centre (Bengel) meets a newly woken counter-loyalty that is ‘Faith’. There salvation advances. There progresses the world-transformation grounded in Christ.”¹¹ In other words, faithfulness as response to divine faithfulness is the extension of the gospel as power into the present: “The righteousness of God, which was in Christ is the secret of the power of his resurrection, it is also the presupposition of the redemption of the world from destruction, which has begun through this power.”¹² Again, the role of the resurrection is mentioned. The righteousness of God is above human categories of morality and hence as beyond good and evil; so here is a real direct immediate access to God offered only by means of a revelation – something new, even if it’s been around for centuries, since it is not part of our nature:

hence the content of the gospel is a discovery for us, not a general truth, and treated as from God; the object of a deed, not of a static property, humanly speaking the possibility of this discovery and divinely speaking the readiness for this deed is always available. The reality of the righteousness of God in Christ is the New in the Gospel.¹³

Humans can discover their real essence in this history (not history in general). Here we see that already in 1919 Barth liked to play on the ambiguity of human faith and divine faithfulness: more would be made of it in the Second Edition but the *novum* or eccentricity is already there, for critics like Jülicher to observe. Jülicher complained about the inconsistency of Barth’s translating

10 “Wir stehen schon in den Anfängen dieses Geschehens, und eine weite Perspektive eröffnet sich auf einen Zustand in der Freiheit Gottes.” (Rom 5:2; 8:18). Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 20.

11 “Jetzt mit uns! Es handelt sich darum, an die Kraft Gottes zu *glauben*. Das ‘Centrum Paulinum’! (Bengel) [...] wenn die Treue Gottes [...] einer neuerwachten Gegentreue begegnet, das ist ‘Glaube’. Da hebt die Errettung an. Da setzt sich die im Christus begründete Weltenwende fort.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 20 – 21.

12 “Die Gerechtigkeit Gottes, die im Christus war, ist das Geheimnis der Kraft seiner Auferstehung, sie auch die Voraussetzung der Errettung der Welt vom Verderben, die durch diese Kraft begonnen hat.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 22.

13 “So ist uns gerade der *Inhalt* des Evangeliums eine *Entdeckung*, nicht eine allgemeine Wahrheit, und von Gott aus betrachtet: der Gegenstand einer *Tat*, nicht einer ruhenden Eigenschaft, so sicher menschlicherseits die Möglichkeit dieser Entdeckung und göttlicherseits die Bereitschaft zu dieser Tat immer vorhanden war. Die *Wirklichkeit* der Gerechtigkeit Gottes im Christus ist das Neue im Evangelium.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 23.

in *Romans* I, that Barth has to translate *pistis* at 1:12, 4:5, and 16:26 as *Glaube* (faith), since he cannot get round it, given the plain and obvious sense there, yet at 1:16 insists on translating *pistis* thus: “Gottes Treue dem Glauben des Menschen.”¹⁴ In the 1922 edition, Barth, on Jülicher’s account, has only reinforced this error with this exposition.

And that is it, so far as ‘1919’ is concerned. One can see that in starkest terms the register in the commentary is simply exegetical, not yet hermeneutical, in that it seeks to do little more than to spell out and echo the content of the two verses, even if that spelling out and echoing has some distinctive quirks. As Michael Trowitzsch puts it, the necessity of an objective penance was already emphasised in this first edition of the *Romans* commentary, a penance of direction, of thinking and willing, which questions the historical whole of the church, in order to gain for the whole a new answer in God and from God: what can it leave unaffected?¹⁵ An unfortunate glorying in scholarly method in academic biblical exegesis had made man the measure of things, such that biblical scholars ironically symbolised original sinfulness, as with Harnack (“sich des Gegenstandes erkenntnismäßig zu bemächtigen”¹⁶), according to which conceptual translation of the object is what gives the events of the Gospel any continuing force, whereas Barth’s principle of organization is conversely a distinctive disempowering (“Sein Ordnungsprinzip ist umgekehrt eine eigentümliche *Entmächtigung*”¹⁷), so that the only power that is still in business is the divine one. Roughly speaking, in the first 1919 edition the message of *Romans* is considered in first century clothes, for its naked power is its signature and one is to listen to and be moved by it, not to critique it or process it. As has been well observed,¹⁸ Ro-

14 And on 3:26 after 3:25: “Hier wo das Wort *Pistis* artikellos mit *Jesus* als Genitiv, ist die Ergänzung von ‘seiner’ und ‘In *Jesus* erwiesen’ ein Willkürakt ersten Ranges, eine Gewalttat.” Jülicher, “Rezension zu Barth, Karl, *Der Römerbrief*. 2. Aufl. in neuer Bearb.,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 47 (1922): 537–542, 540.

15 “Eine ‘objektive Buße’, deren Notwendigkeit Barth schon in der ersten Auflage des Römerbriefkommentars hervorhebt, eine ‘Buße der Orientierung, Buße des Denkens und Wollens, Buße, die das geschichtliche *Ganze* der Kirche in Frage stellte, um für das *Ganze eine* neue Antwort in Gott und aus Gott zu gewinnen’ – was kann sie unbetroffen lassen?” Michael Trowitzsch, “Nachkritische Schriftauslegung,” in *Über die Moderne hinaus. Theologie im Übergang* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 88–119, 106. Cf. Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der “dialektischen Theologie” Karl Barths. Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der “Kirchlichen Dogmatik”*, BEvTh 101 (München: Kaiser, 1987).

16 Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch, Gesamtausgabe V.35 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), 68.

17 Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, 111.

18 Werner M. Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastasen-theologie in Karl Barths zweitem “Römerbrief”*, NBST 5 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1987), 183.

mans I uses ‘organic’ metaphors; of transformation, of the new being grasped even through introducing the old, with that movement of a process eschatology, which for humans means “become who we are in Christ” (as per his comments on Romans 16:1). This is the growing of Christ and the kingdom of God within the world.

Kenneth Oakes has argued that here there is no real break with liberalism’s ethics and subjectivity here, nor even with Wilhelm Herrmann’s dialectics.¹⁹ Oakes emphasises the immediacy ‘borrowed’ from [Hermann] Kutter, with appeal to lines from Barth such as: “Aber meine ganze Aufmerksamkeit war darauf gerichtet, durch das Historische *hindurch* zu sehen in den Geist der Bibel, der der ewige Geist ist.”²⁰ Yet there is something bigger than a spirit of subjectivity going on here. There is nothing less than a conviction about a power beyond any human judgement of good and evil (ethics).

4 Intermezzo: between the volumes

In early 1920, Barth published a small booklet containing his lengthy review of Franz Overbeck’s posthumously edited volume *Christentum und Kultur* (1919), combined with a short sermon by Eduard Thurneysen. Ryan Glomsrud sums up the gist of the debt of Barth to Overbeck:

While Overbeck generally corroborated Barth’s emerging two-world eschatology, reinvigorated the time-eternity and God-man diastases, and encouraged his thinking about *Urgeschichte* or Primal History (in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15), these doctrinal and material themes were important secondarily, as part of a more general attack against theological accommodationism and bourgeois religion.²¹

Then there was the more general attack on Liberal Theology. Now of course Barth was also reacting against something that had taken the form of his oppo-

¹⁹ Kenneth Oakes, *Reading Karl Barth: A Companion to Karl Barth’s Epistle to the Romans* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 9.

²⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 3. See Oakes, *Reading Karl Barth*, 39.

²¹ Ryan Glomsrud, “The Cat-Eyed Theologians: Franz Overbeck and Karl Barth,” *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte / Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 16 (2009): 37–57, 39. Eberhard Vischer contributed “Overbeck redivivus/Der neuentdeckte Overbeck,” *Die Christliche Welt* 36 (1922): 109–12, 125–30, 142–8; “Immer noch Unerledigte Anfragen,” *Die Christliche Welt* 36 (1922), 286ss. Barth responded in “Immer noch Unerledigte Anfragen,” *Die Christliche Welt* 36 (1922), 249; cf. Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1922–1925*, ed. Holger Finze-Michaelson, Gesamtausgabe III.19 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 58–64.

nents' objections. The fact was that Adolf von Harnack had labelled Barth's insights 'nichts' (as reported by Martin Rade to Barth in a letter of 13.10.1921). Friedrich Gogarten had then defended Karl Barth against Adolf Jülicher's "Ein moderner Paulusausleger,"²² but even Emil Brunner spoke of the risk of Dogmatism that would take German theology back to the Seventeenth Century (hence, *Neu-Orthodoxie*). Jülicher denounced Barth's intellectualism as being of scant use to pastors. Yet Barth was arguably the one who insisted on more than just exegetical *Akribie*, as Barth would imply in his arch comment on Jülicher's "fragments of information," in the "Vorwort" to *Römerbrief* II. Meanwhile, Paul Wernle accused Barth of Biblicism, of "restitution theology" and for treating Paul as a systematic theologian, but also (and worse) of identifying his own commentary with Romans itself (given the cheeky "[...] dann hat dieses Buch Zeit, zu – warten. Der Römerbrief selbst wartet ja auch" at the end of the 1919 "Vorwort"). He was also accused of wilful obscurantism as reflected in his defence of that charge: "Laßt uns in dreißig Jahren weiter reden von der Einfachheit, heute aber von der Wahrheit!"²³ As Barth himself wryly reported in his Foreword to the new 1963 edition, Bultmann denigrated '1919' as an undiscerning support for perpetuating the Pauline Christ-myth.²⁴

The Resurrection seemed like the wind in the believer's sails, "behind us."²⁵ It is in joining with the death and resurrection that one has a share in the Kingdom of God, almost a mystical-organic link through Jesus Christ, whose Humanity was and is an *organon*. With allusions to the parable of mustard seed (*die kommende Gotteswelt im Keime*) this is more like Idealism with an inner-worldly development than the neo-Kantian or Hermannian 'subjective' morality.²⁶

The rather upbeat tone of the 1919 edition is discernible. Michael Beintker's summary is of a work written in the language of a hope, that sees the world in the first light of redemption: "you in Christ are becoming what you are means a moving from *peccator* to *iustus in Christo*, is in contrast with the 'we are in faith

22 Friedrich Gogarten, "Vom heiligen Egoismus des Christen. Eine Antwort auf Jülichers Aufsatz: Ein moderner Paulusausleger," *Christliche Welt* 34 (1920), in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie*. Teil I: *Karl Barth – Heinrich Barth – Emil Brunner*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann (München: Kaiser, 1977), 99–105 (original pagination: 546–50).

23 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, ix.

24 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 8. Bultmann's review was in *Christliche Welt* 34 (1920), 740.

25 "Barth denkt in R I entschieden von der Auferstehung her. Seine theologischen Prämissen sind: 'Ihr habt Ostern hinter euch!'" Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 180. And: "Die Verheißung ist in der Bibel *realistisch*, nicht *moralisch* gemeint." Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 95.

26 Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 180, n. 125.

what we are not’ of *Romans II*.”²⁷ Some Hegelian ‘Prozeßdialektik’ was going on.²⁸ In the *Tambacher Vortrag* of Autumn 1919 (“Der Christ in der Gesellschaft”) a change could be observed, namely the emphasis on the “brittle” condition (*Sprödigkeit*) in which the divine stood over against the human.²⁹

5 To the Sources 2: *Römerbrief II* (1922)

Barth answered his critics in the Foreword to the Second Edition of 1922 by insisting on the dialectic of the *Sache*, in order to get from *Verstehen* to *Erklären*, as coined by Dilthey. Texts are to be put in tension with concepts, and one should not remain at the level of words and their basic meanings. New is the emphasis on the otherness of God, the wall between First and Twentieth Centuries has to become transparent. Bruce McCormack has argued that the key to 1922 is more Overbeck and Heinrich Barth than Kierkegaard and his famous “infinite qualitative distinction.”³⁰ Indeed, by 1921–22 Barth was not far from Overbeck’s position of the sure need for a downgrade of all theologians and theologies,³¹ even of his own; all with the purpose of enabling listening. Not to end with smugness, but to hear repeatedly that we are elect in Christ. In this second preface, Barth delivers a critique of Christian theology that understood itself as a historical process, and a concomitant abandonment of eschatology. Likewise, in 1873, Overbeck had taken no prisoners in his war on liberal theology in his *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*:

After all the only possible abode of Christianity lies, so far as the past is concerned, not in history, but in the history before history, the super-history (*Urgeschichte*). And only non-historical concepts, standards, and possibilities of observation could put us into the position

27 “*Römer I* ist in der Sprache einer Hoffnung geschrieben, die die Welt ‘in das anbrechende Morgenrot der Erlösung gestellt’ sieht.” Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 119. “‘Ihr seid im Christus und ihr werdet erst, was ihr seid’. Das ist in Unterschied zum herben ‘Wir sind durch den Glauben, was wir nicht sind’ von *Römer II* die charakteristische soteriologische Grundformel von *Römer I* [...] Aber in dieser Spanne gibt es eine eindeutige Bewegung vom Sünden-sein zum In-Christus Sein.” Beintker, *Dialektik*, 111–12.

28 See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Köln: Hegner, 1962), 71.

29 “Denn sehr betont verstärkt Barth auch die ‘Sprödigkeit’, in der das Göttliche dem Menschlichen gegenübersteht.” Beintker, *Dialektik*, 118.

30 Cf. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 219–32.

31 Karl Barth, “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie [1922],” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten*, 144–75.

to understand, to talk about – in fact, to represent in any way – this Christianity which is not Christianity in any historical sense.³²

Here one can identify a point of view that conditioned Barth's early understanding of the nature of theology. Overbeck's notion of Primal history (*Urgeschichte*) corresponding to the eschaton became for Barth a kind of regulative category or transcendental eternity, which secured and gave meaning to historical-temporal time.³³ *Urgeschichte* can be defined as "that which has enduring significance for history."³⁴ This realm was not open to human inquiry, but depended entirely on divine revelation, such that, as with 1919's first edition, there was no Idealist 'cognitive content' involved. Barth equated this use of eschatology with a kind of low-light theological vision. Would this mean post-resurrection of Jesus or more than that 'the Apostolic Age,' or was the latter more Overbeck and not very much Barth? That seems a crucial question. Now it has been widely argued and even assumed that the second edition of Romans is a charter for so-called apocalyptic readings of Paul.³⁵ However, it seems untrue – that Barth, any more than Paul, viewed the New Testament as somehow introducing a paradigm shift in *how to view reality and God*, pace Käsemann (the power of the gospel in its radical political actualization), and also J. Louis Martyn and Douglas Campbell. One might compare Gogarten's apology for Barth against Jülicher, who was of course writing about the 1919 edition. Jülicher had written that Barth's 1919 commentary was all about the state of Europe, and not really about Christian religion which goes on despite crises. Gogarten's response was that the church was called to find answers to crises of time, and wondered whether Jülicher's historical *Forschung* could do this.

It was quite clear, Gogarten insisted, that Barth valued tradition (against the turn to immediacy of the likes of Hermann Kutter), but nevertheless he (Barth) was right that Christianity per se is "die ewig-ursprüngliche Gottestat," never to be confused with something in history, so that it can free people within history.³⁶ Indeed, a loss of the cosmic dimension of Christ's kingly power can be

32 Karl Barth, "Unsettled Questions for Theology Today," in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920–1928* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 62, which paid special attention to Overbeck (German original, 1920).

33 Cf. Glomsrud, "The Cat-Eyed Theologians," 62.

34 Oakes, *Reading Karl Barth*, 18.

35 Cf. Philip Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

36 "Man müßte die Unterscheidung zwischen der ursprünglichen ewigen Tat Gottes und ihren historischen Folgen und Auswirkungen [...] sehr streng durchführen. Man wüßte dann, was Men-

traced in the liberal tradition of Schleiermacher, Harnack and others. This ‘apocalyptic’ tradition can be upbeat in a Romans I paradigm – Jesus is Lord over this world, for all our perplexities, as one who *deals with* hostile powers.

For, according to *Romans II* of 1922, the Incarnation was an event of power that *darkens* the mind. Theology has to take account of the event in which the one who speaks in the Scriptures made himself accessible and perceptible, yet not in unequivocal terms. It is a case of “das Absolute existentiell gedacht,”³⁷ but not necessarily *understood*. Whereas ‘Apocalyptic’ means the heavens opening and all being understood *en route* to a cosmic end, that is not the signature of 1922. ‘Apocalyptic’ does not seem to be *le mot juste*.

If one poses the question: “what had changed since 1919?”, it is surely significant that a complete reconstruction of the commentary was necessary for him. As he put it in the preface to ‘1922’: no stone of the first edition has remained in the same place. Any continuity between the two amounts to the unity of the historical subject matter and of the Resurrection itself, and this will be available for the readers to work with if they wish to apply this second ‘preliminary work.’

What had changed according to Barth’s own account of things in his new Foreword? Well, he tells us there have been four ‘new’ factors operative between 1919 and 1922. 1. his continued self-occupation with Paul, allowing new light on the subject; 2. Overbeck, that remarkable and unusually pious man (“merkwürdigen und selten frommen Mann”)³⁸; 3. a better grasp of Plato and Kant; and a new one of Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky with help from Eduard Thurneysen; 4. following the reviews of *Römerbrief I*, and learning from them, the complimentary ones above all.

The last of these points can be illustrated by the following passage in the foreword to the Second Edition:

The hurried accusations which Ragaz and his people raise, that this is an enterprise in stubborn theological arrogance, allow me please to deny. To whom my question really seems otiose, that person may go in peace. We others are of the opinion that the question about the ‘what?’, right at a time where apparently everyone pushes to raise their voices in the streets, is a serious question. I make no pretence that it is proper Theology which awaits the reader. Despite this warning, should non-theologians get hold of the book and I know

schenwerk und was mehr ist [...] Aber nur dann frei wird, wenn die Menschen, die zu der Zeit gerade am Werk sind, das, was neu werden will, von ihren eigenen Zwecken, ihren eigenen Ängsten, eigenen Programmen frei und unbehelligt lassen können”. Gogarten, “Vom heiligen Egoismus des Christen,” 103 (549).

³⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 173.

³⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, vii.

some of those who will understand it better than many theologians – this would a great source of joy, for I am of the opinion that the content touches every person because his [Paul's] question is that of everyone.³⁹

Here something more needs to be said about Overbeck, whom Barth himself here has singled out as a key influence. Expectation of an immediate imminent break in of that hyper-historical world was the essence of Christianity.⁴⁰ Indeed, the eschatological element was key for early Christianity.⁴¹ Overbeck certainly emphasised the eschatological rather than the immanent forces within Christian civilisation. The New Testament represented a pre-history that was programmatic; as historic, it held the world in it. Yet Overbeck didn't much talk about eschatology in a positive sense, but rather 'negatively,' in order to qualify any immanentism. What he did view as having rather authority was the *Entstehungsgeschichte/Urgeschichte*: yet, the paradox is that that the 'programmatic' early Christian history in the sense of its acts was so much eschatological in its outlook and motivation, rendering it less than programmatic, more a gadfly for any pretensions to be programmatic.⁴² This is what Barth was able to present positively, as programmatic for Church History. The bible mattered very much to Barth too: "I hold it to be profitable for men to take its conceptions at least as seriously as they take their own."⁴³ But in what sense was it programmatic in its details? It could be that Barth transposed radical ecclesiology of Overbeck into a Christological or even a historical key. However, to answer that better, a closer look at his exegesis of Romans 1:16–17 is necessary.

On this Ryan Glomsrud comments: "There is in the above a subtle but persistent Platonic, neo-Kantian motif that seems not to have troubled Barth."⁴⁴ Now this seems unfair, despite Eberhard Jüngel's also having made this charge

³⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xiv–xv.

⁴⁰ Compare also Hans Schindler: "In der Erwartung des unmittelbar bevorstehenden Anbruchs jener hyperhistorischen Welt sieht Overbeck das eigentliche Wesen des Christentums. Dieses Christentum aber hat sich selbst ad absurdum geführt." *Barth und Overbeck. Ein Beitrag zur Genesis der dialektischen Theologie im Lichte der gegenwärtigen theologischen Situation* (Gotha: Klotz, 1936), 9.

⁴¹ Niklaus Peter, *Im Schatten der Modernität Franz Overbecks. Weg zur "Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie"* (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 1992), 240.

⁴² "Urgeschichte ist also bei Overbeck eine geschichtliche Kategorie, die die unerforschbaren Bedingungen der Ermöglichung von erforschter Geschichte kennzeichnet." Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 39. Hence it is not something pre-historic; however "Barth verwandelt Urgeschichte in eine unzeitliche Kategorie." (39).

⁴³ Karl Barth, Preface to the Second Edition: *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 12.

⁴⁴ Glomsrud, "The Cat-Eyed Theologians," 110.

too, for it's clear that Barth is not Platonising here. The time of the earliest church is the time of the origin of Christianity, from which it realized itself and is not itself to be understood as something independent of temporality. That means also that original Christianity is not the favourite part of Christianity of the past but is taken up in the trans-temporality of that past, foreordained to it, in categorical as well as qualitative insight, more than past Christianity.⁴⁵ Yet what this might mean is that attention shifts from the Resurrection of Christ to the impact of resurrection through the early church, not simply the transcendental and formless 'resurrection power.'

When we get to Barth's exegesis of Romans 1:16 in his Second Edition, the saving message of the resurrection is once again "the power of God" – the action, the miracle of miracles in which God reveals himself as the unknown God (Acts 17:33), creator and redeemer. God is the unknown God who as such gives life and breath and everything. So his power is not just a natural one; it is a 'second-natural' one and as such it is the *krisis* of all powers, by which all that is gets measured, i. e. the first and last as the ground of things, not next to them as 'supranatural,' but way beyond them: "The power of God, the appointment [*Einsetzung*] of Jesus to 'Christ' is in the strongest sense presupposition [*Voraussetzung*], free from all graspable content."⁴⁶ There is no conceptual "content" in the power that made Jesus into Christ, *contra* Harnack *et al.* So far this seems fairly much in keeping with what was said in 1919.

Thus Barth's interpretation of the gospel is again to declare that it lacks content in itself and simply directs one to Christ:

To this message all doctrine, all morals and all worship of the Christian community relates only insofar that all is merely a shellhole or aspires only to be crater in which the message

45 "Zunächst abstrahiert Overbeck ausgehend von der Beobachtung, dass das Christentum als 'Ding' resp. 'Organismus' ein 'histori[sches] Leben, d. h. eine histor[ische] Wirkamk[eit]' hat, dass es wie jede andere historische Erscheinung neben und vor dieser historischen eine 'prahistori[sche] Zeit' hat. Diese prähistorische Zeit ist die Zeit der Entstehung des Christentums, aus der heraus es sich erst verwirklicht und selbst noch nicht als eigenständige historische Größe zu verstehen ist. Das bedeutet zugleich, dass 'Urchristentum' nicht 'ein beliebiges Stück des [Chri]s[ten]th[um]s der Vergangenh[eit], sondern in der Überzeitlichkeit selbst jeder Vergangenheit enthoben, ihr vorgeordnet, in kategorialer wie in qualitativer Hinsicht 'mehr als vergangene[s] [Chri]s[ten]th[um]' ist." Ferenc Herzig, *Theologie als "unmögliche Möglichkeit" bei Franz Overbeck und in den Anfängen der Theologie Karl Barths* (Hamburg: Diplomarbeit, 2013), 10.

46 "Die Kraft Gottes, die Einsetzung Jesu zum Christus (1,4) ist im strengsten Sinn *Voraussetzung*, frei von allem greifbaren Inhalt." Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 12. The main text above has my own translation rather than the rather 'free' one by Hoskyns.

has left its imprint. The Christian community knows no words that are holy per se or works and things; she knows words, works and things which *as negations* point to the Holy One.⁴⁷

Claiming to know things about God is religion, wherein there are plenty of chances to be ashamed (of that gospel), but not where the Unknown God is concerned: “‘Was kein Auge gesehen, kein Ohr gehört, was in keines Menschen Herz gekommen ist.’ Darum schämt er sich des Evangeliums nicht.”⁴⁸ One is not ashamed of a gospel of the unknown God. This is a slightly odd reading, but its provocation (not least to biblical scholars!) is worth pondering. Paul seems to be saying he is not ashamed because its power outweighs any doubts that might cause him to keep his faith private. Barth’s exegesis by contrast – that one cannot be ashamed of the unknown – here seems like special pleading, to serve his ‘new’ doctrine of an unknown God. The God of *Romans I* was not particularly knowable, but at least made his presence strongly felt. In *Romans II* God narrows down human possibilities to where we are pressed into a tight space. This is a severe mercy.

The Gospel [...] announces to us a transformation of our creatureliness into freedom, victory of life over death, a bringing back of all that is lost. It is the wake-up call and the fire-alarm of our coming new world. But what does that all mean? We cannot know it now and here, which is bound to this and that. We can only receive it for the sense of God which is created through the message of salvation comprehends it. The world does not stop being the world and humanity remains humanity in which it is received. It remains to humanity to bear the whole weight of sin and the whole curse of death. No self-delusion about the situation of our being there and being so! The resurrection which is our starting exit is also our barrier. But the barrier is also the exit. The No which meets us is the No of God. Our deprivation is also that which helps us. What limits us is the new country. Just because God’s No! is complete it is also his Yes. So we have a view in the power of God, the gate, the hope. And so the direction of the narrow way in this world, the possibility to go always the next small step in “consoled despair” (Luther).⁴⁹

Prisoners become watchmen, as with Habakkuk. What raises all truth in the world is also its foundation.

47 “Auf diese Botschaft bezieht sich alle Lehre, alle Moral, aller Kultus der Christusgemeinde, sofern das alles nur Einschlagstrichter ist, nur Hohlraum sein will, in dem Botschaft sich selbst darstellt. Die Christusgemeinde kennt keine an sich heiligen Worte, Werke und Dinge, sie kennt nur Worte, Werke und Dinge, dies als Negationen auf den Heiligen hinweisen.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 12.

48 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 12.

49 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 14 (my translation).

Something here has changed about the resurrection. It is a starting point but now also a barrier and will not let us go back through it to reach God. In fact, any idea of power is played down to the point of almost disappearing. Moreover, this power is not immediate, for the spirit is the denial of direct immediacy. It is in stopping us and holding us at the barrier with something to look forward to. Compared with '1919' it is gloomier about the quality of the Christian life in the present. Truth is thus not to be shared directly and not directly to be viewed. According to the Spirit, Christ is made to be Son of God (Rom 1:4). But the Spirit is the very denial of the direct immediacy, such that if Christ be the true God so he has to be such in unknownness. Direct knowledge is typical of idolaters. The Power of God to salvation is something so new, so unheard of, and so unexpected in this world that it can be heard and received only as contradiction.⁵⁰

One might see this as the clarion call of what was to become 'Dialectical Theology.'

Who acknowledges the limiting of the world through a contradictory truth the limiting of himself through a contradictory will, to that person it will be hard to remove the thorn because he knows too much of this contradiction than he could escape but must come to terms with it in order to live with it (Overbeck), who thus finally confesses to this contradiction and submerges oneself his life to base on it, who believes. And the believer finds in the saving message the power of God to salvation, the preliminary rays of eternal blessedness and the courage, to set oneself to watch. But free choice between offence and faith is what is discovered and in each moment. And where faith comes, there is the warmth of feeling, the anger of conviction, the achieved level of sensibility and civilisation always only something accompanying it, very much of this side and thus in itself unimportant characteristics of the real process. The characteristics of the process of faith become not as positive dimensions, but only as negations of other positive dimensions, as stages of a cleaning up operation, which would make room in Being in the Now for the Being of Beyond.⁵¹

If ever there was an existentialist-eschatological Barth, this was it. As Ingrid Spieckermann tells us, there has been a change from historical crisis (*Krise*) to theological *Krisis*, the Greek term being deliberately used: "Der nach-kritische Mensch ist für Barths Römerbriefkommentar 'der Starke' aus dem 15. Kapitel des Römerbriefs."⁵² Note that this is not merely in opposition to the weak who are the fussy *kritische Bibelwissenschaftler*, who understand reality without reference to God and his actions, but all who lack confidence in the levelling power of

⁵⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 16.

⁵¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 14–15.

⁵² Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis. Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (München: Kaiser, 1985), 77.

Gospel against all sorts of pretensions. Yet Barth adds that faith lives from God not just as a suspension of worldliness, but also of unworldliness. Likewise, Faith is never identical with ‘piety’ even were it purest and finest. And as much as piety is a characteristic of a process of faith, as a suspension of other worldly ‘givens’ it includes its own suspension. Faith lives from itself (‘from faith to faith’) only because it lives from God. That is the Pauline kernel (Bengel).⁵³ *Pistis* gets translated as *Treue Gottes* here, in apposition to another Pauline verse, 1 Corinthians 1:9 (“faithful to his having called you”), such that for ‘*pistos ho theos*’ in Romans 1:17⁵⁴: “he, God, is faithful to his promise” is an accurate translation. Hence, as Michael Trowitzsch insists, this is not a gloomy gospel, but one of thankfulness for an overarching blessing, even if actualised more in the past and future than in the present.⁵⁵ Ingrid Spieckermann comments that this here is not a dialectic *within* revelation itself, as Jüngel was wont to claim.⁵⁶ For there is an objectivity – not least of the Good. Yet for Karl the *Prinzip* was Christological one: there was no other *Ursprung*. The Incarnation quietly replaces any such originary *Prinzip* and replaces it with a teleological-moving one. However, the power of God now in *Romans II* remains on far side of cross, in

53 “Eben darum ist der Glaube niemals identisch mit der ‘Frömmigkeit’ und wenn sie die reinste und feinste wäre. Und sofern ‘Frömmigkeit’ ein Merkmal des Glaubensvorgangs ist, ist sie es als Aufhebung anderer Weltgegebenheiten – vor allem aber offenbar als ihre eigene Aufhebung. Der Glaube lebt aus sich selber, weil er aus Gott lebt. Das ist das ‘Centrum Paulinum’ (Bengel).” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 15.

54 Cornelis van der Kooi tells us that clearly Barth of the second edition did appeal to other Pauline epistles, whatever the complaint of Jülicher about *Romans I*, “Vorwort”, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, XVII.

55 “Der Dank trägt das Leben ungleich umfassender als sein Gefühl, ist größer als das Herz des Menschen, das sich, sofern dem Dank anvertraut, aus der Enge entlassen erfährt – ist als solches nicht Sache des Willens oder eines Entschlusses.” Michael Trowitzsch, *Karl Barth heute* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 437. Cf. Helmut Gollwitzer, “Der Glaube als Dank. Christliche Existenz als Leben in der Dankbarkeit bei Karl Barth,” in *Auch das Denken darf dienen. Aufsätze zur Theologie und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 1, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt (München: Beck, 1988), 387–408, esp. 394. This is the opposite of Kafka (*Briefe an Milena*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1952, 308) that all must be worked for; but Barth further emphasised the “Grundbegriff seiner Ethik, d. h. seines Nachdenkens über Sinn und Aufgabe unseres Lebens” (Trowitzsch, *Karl Barth heute*, 441). Jesus led the way: Trowitzsch shows how this theme runs through to *Das christliche Leben*: ‘Dankbar zum Trotz’ is a ‘waking up’; cf. Thomas Mann, *Lotte in Weimar* (Stockholm: Bermann-Fischer, 1939), 7.

56 “Man wird kaum so weit gehen dürfen, hier von einer ‘Dialektik des zu erkennenden Seins’ (Jüngel, *Barth-Studien*, 143) zu sprechen. [...] weder im Objekt noch im Subjekt des Denkens, sondern in beide begründenden und begrenzenden selbsthaft-schöpferischen transzendentalen Ursprung des Logos verankerten Begriff der Erkenntnis.” Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis*, 111, n. 10.

darkness. So we see a faith which responds to the faithfulness of God and is its mirror image or *Entsprechung*. It is not a coming close to God. In fact what is clear is that the lonely figure of Habakkuk in his watchtower by the gate, looking for the future dawn, is paradigmatic for the believer.

The great impossibility has announced to him the end and goal of the small impossibilities. He will live from the faithfulness of God. That, whether one says ‘from the faithfulness of God or ‘from the faith of humans that is the same thing. For the tradition of this prophetic word indicates in both directions. The Faithfulness of God it is, that he as the wholly other, as the holy One with his No! in inescapable fashion comes to us and goes by. And the faith of humans is the awe, which allows this no to fall, the will to hollow space, that moved getting stuck in Negation. Where the faithfulness of God meets the faith of humans there the righteousness reveals itself. There the righteous will live.⁵⁷

“Das ist die Sache, um die es im Römerbrief geht.” Yet to his credit he agrees that the meaning of the words is ambiguous, the sense ambivalent and that the beauty of faith is that it is something one can attribute simultaneously to God, Abraham, Christ, Paul, ourselves.

So there was a shift to a ‘consistent eschatology’ with *Romans II*, one future-oriented and on no way organic for now and ‘our lives.’ “We have indeed received new life but only as a promise whose fulfilment we await in hope.”⁵⁸ Also, the change to ‘faithfulness of God’ removes any flickering traces of Hermannian piety. No longer would Barth write as he did in 1915: “Diese Tatsache ist das *Leben aus Gott*, das uns geschenkt wird durch unsern *Zusammenhang mit der Geschichte*.”⁵⁹ Rather, faith exists where there is no life forthcoming from God.

6 Where are we now?

“Gott ist alles, der Mensch ist nichts, und du bist ein Idiot” is how Barth caricatured his position in response to his critics. The serious point is rather that God is just not *verfügbar* for any cause. Perhaps the reaction to 1914–18 was a delayed response. What is revealed in the gospel’s theological terms is just how far away we are, and that God is not part of natural knowledge. Even if Jülicher was right,

⁵⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 17.

⁵⁸ Oakes, *Reading Karl Barth*, 21.

⁵⁹ ZThK article of 1915, 89 quoted by Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis*, 49.

that Barth did sound like Marcion, and as Werner Ruschke⁶⁰ admits there are astonishing apparent parallels to Marcion and Paul Göhre's *Der unbekannte Gott*, this is more at the level of words than of meaning, for Christ does give form to revelation including that of the identity of the *fremde Gott*. Even every via of Negative theologies can only be a *Holzweg*, since *der Weg ist Christus*. Dialectic is a method only in the sense of keeping the dogmatic and the critical ways in check, not as a denial or qualification of revelation. Only as the way of Christ is it the way of Abraham. As Jülicher himself observed, Barth's 1919 translation⁶¹ of Romans 4:1 slipped in 'the way of [Abraham],' but this is not much more than Luther writing *allein* after *Glauben* in his translation of Romans 3:28, and by 1922 it is removed. Barth wants to insist that as believers look ahead with Abraham they are also looking ahead like the earthly Christ to the glory set before them.

In the immediate aftermath Erik Peterson thought that Barth's message meant "no more theology,"⁶² and Bonhoeffer argued Barth's stance was not any more humble than honest systematising.⁶³ Beintker spots a climb down from the time of the 1922 Elgersburger address onwards, so that by 1925 theology became at the service of preaching with a Christological focus. It is only theology that has to be dialectical not Revelation itself, which helps keep theology in its place.⁶⁴ Our theology is only *ektypisch*.

One hundred years on, Jörg Lauster has this to say about this Barth: "the re-mythologising of the idea of God, the fixed insistence on the thought that God speaks, represents a forceful infantilising concept of God, which has to work in an off-putting and excluding way, because it contains in no ways points of connection with modern critical thinking."⁶⁵ Also, at least in Munich, "for

⁶⁰ As Ruschke concludes his study: "War 1914 der sich in der *Krise* offenbarende Gott das Thema der Theologie, so ist 1919 der in *Christus* die *Krise* überwindende Gott das Zentrum von Barths Denken." *Entstehung und Ausführung*, 178.

⁶¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 107.

⁶² Erik Peterson, *Was ist Theologie?* (Bonn: Friedrich Cohen, 1925), 132.

⁶³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein* (Habilitation 1929; München: Kaiser, 1988), 110.

⁶⁴ "Aber das Dogma ist nicht *das* Signum der Theologie, sondern *neben der Offenbarung*, dem Zeugnis der Schrift, der Schriftauslegung, der Verkündigung der Kirche und auch dem 'Gebot der Stunde' eines der Momente, die insgesamt die konkrete theologische Arbeit ausmachen. So kann es nicht gut sein, *einen* bestimmten theologischen Arbeitsgang von Bibel, Exegese und Predigt zu isolieren und damit abzutrennen." Beintker, *Dialektik*, 137, with reference to "Kirche und Theologie" (1925), in Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1925–1930*, 307ss; 326.

⁶⁵ "Die Remythisierung der Gottesvorstellung, das beharrliche Insistieren darauf, dass Gott redet, stellt eine geradezu gewaltsame Infantilisierung des Gottesbegriffs dar, die vielfach abschreckend und ausschließend wirken muss, weil sie keinerlei Anknüpfungspunkte an modernes kritisches Denken bereithält." Jörg Lauster, *Zwischen Entzauberung und Remythisierung*,

[Trutz] Rendtorff, Barth is the first one in ‘theological history’ to pursue theology completely under the conditions of autonomy.”⁶⁶

This ‘Munich judgement’ seems unnecessarily harsh and somewhat off target. Barth’s vision is sober: revelation asks more questions than it provides answers. It reminds one that waiting for answers is of the essence of New Testament Christianity, which works as a pattern for all subsequent generations of the faith, partly to inspire or empower (that was the import of ‘1919’), partly to bring limit and sobriety to our pretensions at knowing.

From the side of the guild of New Testament scholars, Francis Watson has also strongly criticised Barth for failing to show any interest in the historical and religious context of Paul.⁶⁷ One might just have to admit that Barth has very little interest in the phrase ‘to the Jew first and to the Greek,’ but he did write in the 1919 foreword that readers should use other commentaries too. Furthermore, adds Watson, although the first edition sounded promising, by the second, any sense of history, chronology and a cataphatic theology of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God is lost, and replaced with emphases that seem extremely idiosyncratic.⁶⁸ One response to Watson’s objection might be that Barth was trying to do something different particularly in the Second Edition, namely apply – homiletically – to the church of the 1920s what needed to be heard. At the same time as rediscovering a *theologia crucis*, Barth was hermeneutically close in spirit to Paul Ricoeur in that his hermeneutic was about reconstructing the internal dynamic of the text, and reinstating the capacity of the work to project beyond itself in representing a world that one could indwell.⁶⁹ Projecting seems like the *mot juste* here. Others who have followed suit include Giorgio Agamben and even John Barclay in his getting from Pauline text to Christian theories of Gift.⁷⁰

Zum Verhältnis von Bibel und Dogma, Forum Theologische Literaturzeitung 21 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 18ss.

66 Steven D. Long, *Saving Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Preoccupation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 101, 184.

67 Francis Watson, “Re-writing Romans: Theology and Exegesis in Barth’s Early Commentaries,” in *Freedom under the Word: Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis*, ed. Martin Westerholm and Ben Rhodes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 53–70.

68 Watson, “Re-writing Romans,” 59.

69 “On a vérifié l’accord substantiel de la pratique de l’*herméneutique biblique* barthienne avec la double tâche assignée par Ricoeur à l’entreprise herméneutique [...] *Reconstruire la dynamique interne du texte, restituer la capacité de l’œuvre à se projeter au dehors dans la représentation d’un monde que je pourrais habiter.*” Benoît Bourguine, *L’herméneutique théologique de Karl Barth: dans le quatrième volume de la Kirchliche Dogmatik*. (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 510–11.

70 Cf. Beintker, *Dialektik*.

Nevertheless, it might have been better for all if Barth had not removed the foundations he laid in 1919, but had continued to look at the past, while adding what came to him between 1920 and 1922. The two are compatible. The power through the resurrection is that which might turn us towards the Cross in all our sober incomprehension of Divine Otherness.



VI Ethics and Politics

Sarah Stewart-Kroeker

Karl Barth's Commentary on Romans 8:18 – 25: An Ecological Reading

Abstract: When theologians and ethicists draw on past sources to develop responses to the current environmental crisis, they rarely look to Karl Barth. Those that do typically turn to the doctrine of creation in *Church Dogmatics* III. Yet if there is one biblical passage most often cited by environmental theologians and biblicists, it is Romans 8:19–23. This paper develops an ecological reading of Barth's *Römerbrief* commentary on this passage by elaborating the dynamics of mirroring and solidarity Barth describes between humans and creation as a whole. I suggest that the anthropomorphic analogies according to which Barth interprets the suffering of creation may be read constructively. At the same time, I suggest that a complementary affirmation of eco-morphic analogies is necessary to do justice to the "Creation in the creature."

1 Introduction

When theologians and ethicists develop responses to the environmental crisis, they rarely look to Karl Barth. Barth's rejection of natural theology, his anthropocentric doctrine of creation, and his emphasis on divine transcendence and aseity do not encourage ecologically oriented readings. Leading environmental theologians, from Larry Rasmussen to Jürgen Moltmann to Sally McFague to Catherine Keller, all issue strong criticisms of Barth. Keller's is perhaps the starkest, reading in Barth's doctrine of God and his views on sexual difference the same "ineradicable boundary" that "cuts against the possibility of a true interdependence"¹ that she sees as essential to ecological reflection. These critiques are not unfounded; Barth apparently warned the environmental theologian Paul Santmire against pursuing his interest in a "theology of nature."² Willis Jenkins is one of the few environmental thinkers who offers a more sympathetic reading of Barth, primarily through the concept of stewardship elaborated in volume III

1 Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

2 Paul Santmire, *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 117.

of *Church Dogmatics* on the doctrine of creation.³ *Church Dogmatics* III (the volume on the doctrine of creation) is the natural place to look for something – anything – to make of Barth for environmental reflection. Yet if there is one biblical passage most cited by eco-theologians and biblicists, it is Romans 8:19–23:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waits for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and travails in pain together until now. And not only the creation, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body. For by hope we are saved.⁴

Indeed, this passage has been deemed an “environmental mantra.”⁵ So, what might Barth’s *Römerbrief* commentary on this passage yield a century later in light of the increasingly urgent environmental concerns we face today?⁶

This paper draws out two interwoven aspects of the dynamic Barth describes between humans and creation as a whole: mirroring and solidarity. Solidarity, of course, is central to the significance of the Romans passage as a so-called “environmental mantra”: the Romans text portrays all of creation subject to vanity and bound to corruption, groaning together with humanity in that suffering, waiting on the manifestation of the children of God, because it waits – like humans themselves – in hope for deliverance from that bondage. The passage, then, is often read as affirming a cosmic solidarity in subjection, corruption, and hopeful expectation for deliverance and redemption. Humans along with all creatures suffer just as they will be liberated and delivered from corruption. And Barth follows Romans in making this strong affirmation of created solidarity: humans groan “just as much as creation does.” All creatures are subjected to vanity, to “the contrasts of life and death, light and darkness, beauty and ugliness.”

³ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴ As found in the Hoskyns translation of the *Römerbrief*: Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

⁵ Cheryl Hunt, David G. Horrell and Christopher Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra? Ecological Interest in Romans 8:19–23 and a Modest Proposal for its Narrative Interpretation,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 59.2 (2008): 546–79.

⁶ Because I’m primarily interested here in what sort of eco-theological reading we might be able to draw out of this text from Barth, I interpret Barth constructively and in light of aims, questions, and problems that were most certainly not his own.

ness. We groan, as the creation does; we travail in pain together with it.”⁷ “The groaning of the creation and our own groaning is naught but the impress and seal of the Spirit: our cry, *Abba, Father*, is naught but the echo of the divine Word.”⁸

But getting at the nature of the solidarity Barth sees between humans and creatures is not straightforward, and doing so is likely to elicit suspicion from both eco-theologians on the one hand and Barthians on the other. From the eco-theological side, anthropocentrism and human/nonhuman dualism are two longstanding points of theoretical criticism, for the ways in which they lend themselves to sanctioning domination and exploitation of the nonhuman world. From this perspective, the prominence of anthropomorphic language in expressing solidarity with creation is a red flag: the groaning of creation is heard in human words and seen in human experiential terms. Barth describes solidarity in the sort of anthropocentric terms that have long been criticized by eco-theology and environmental ethics.

From a Barthian perspective, on the other hand, his doctrine of revelation, with its strong rejection of natural theology, almost inherently issues a strong caution regarding the premises of environmental theology (Barth's warning against developing a theology of nature is not at all surprising in light of his commitments). Any re-reading of his theology that fails to take account of this central theme will simply be misleading. Barth expresses little appreciation for human efforts at understanding the natural world, which comes through in the *Römerbrief* text we will consider. If we take some kind of attunement to the natural world, a valorization of its beauty and goodness, as a non-negotiable feature of an environmental theology, are eco-theological and Barthian frameworks not mutually undermining? On what terms and to what extent is an ecological reading of Barth possible without compromising Barth's terms?

It is worth noting from the outset that as regards worries about Christian notions of dominion sanctioning human domination, Barth certainly undercuts narratives of human mastery. But when one considers the whole of his theology, he has relatively little to say about more-than-human creation. On the other hand, though, he's much less worried about maintaining a strong human/non-human distinction than a Creator/creature distinction. To the extent, then, that he affirms the continuity of and solidarity in createdness (a point that comes through clearly in his commentary on Romans 8), it's possible to find eco-theological pathways in his thought, particularly insofar as the same analogical-so-

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 312.

8 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 315.

teriological moves he makes with regards to humans in Christ apply to creation in Christ.

I begin with a passage midway through Barth's treatment of Romans 8:18–25, and track backward and then forward. I do this, in part, because in order to tease out the environmental implications of this text, I am piecing together the relevant fragments that emerge from a spiraling, dialectical text that does not address environmental questions directly. I start with this particular passage because it contains a mirroring image that reflects the tension in the ways in which humans perceive their solidarity with creatures: humans see in creation the mirror of their own createdness. This mirror may reflect a kind of human narcissism, but it can also be a sacred encounter of the shared condition, both existentially and theologically.

2 Mirroring

Barth introduces the idea of mirroring by citing a passage from Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*: “men are necessary to Nature's redemption from the curse of the life of beasts; and that in Mankind a mirror is presented to all existence, in which life is no longer meaningless, but stands forth in its metaphysical significance.”⁹ For Nietzsche, humanity endows the natural world with value and meaning by presenting itself as a mirror to existence. But while Barth cites this passage, he later inverts Nietzsche's formulation when he claims that “we must recover that sacred terror in the presence of the creature [...] at the mere createdness of the things which attract us as of the things that frighten us, until we see in their createdness the mirror of our own.”¹⁰ If Barth initially cites Nietzsche's idea of humanity as a mirror to all existence, in this passage creatures present a mirror to humanity. The creature is the mirror of humanity's createdness. Creation takes on a signifying role, rather than receiving its significance in humanity's mirror. But the reaction Barth evokes here is ambivalent: terror, attraction, fright. We are attracted to created things just as we are frightened by them. The “mere createdness” that we share with these things is the source of this ambivalent response. The ambivalence is an apt response to the “ambiguity of finiteness,”¹¹ in which all creatures share. Are we attracted

⁹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307.

¹⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

¹¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 303.

to and frightened by created things *because* they mirror to us our “mere createdness”? And what of this *sacred* or (more accurately) *saving* (*heilsam*) terror?

Barth's inversion of Nietzsche in this passage is the starting point for this essay (though it is midway into his commentary on the verses 18–23 at issue). It will take several steps to fully untangle its significance. Before we can appreciate what Barth means by sacred terror, we need to understand the attraction and fright he thinks humans may experience in the face of createdness. To do this, we need to track back in the commentary. Take this important passage:

Human sorrow and guilt and destiny – as they are manifested dark and inexorable in the countenance and life-story of every single individual, in the madness of our cities and the dullness of our villages, in the banal operations of our most primitive necessities and in the ideological aloofness of our knowledge and conscience, in the horribleness of birth and death, in the riddle of Nature as it cries out at us from every stone and from the bark of every tree, in the riddle presented to us by the futile cycle of History, by the squaring of the circle, and by parallel lines which intersect at no finite point – have, nevertheless, a voice and a brightness.¹²

There is a *voice* and a *brightness* in the “totality of existence and occurrence”¹³ that is nevertheless incapable of *answering* or *illuminating* the suffering of this totality, the riddles of Nature and History. How do we, how should we, hear this voice or see this brightness? The points about seeing and hearing are important – for now I simply flag them in order to come back to them later.

So there is a voice and a brightness in this manifest profusion that nevertheless remains a riddle – a riddle to which humans are attracted, in their desire to solve it. Barth highlights this tension in the response to the outer world that humans find at once “mightily powerful and strangely menacing and hostile.”¹⁴ Indeed, humans are attracted to these riddles of Nature and History all the more, the more aware they are of their own insecurity.

The more men are aware of their own insecurity and find themselves, under the poignant influence of Christianity, unable to kick against the pricks and to forget that they are men, the more is their attention fixed upon the world by which they are encompassed, the more certainly do they recognize their solidarity with it, and the more passionately do they seek to penetrate its secrets. If this be not so, how can we explain that strange and modern desire to understand the glaciers – on whose brink even Goethe stayed his march – the desert, the North Pole, the bottomless ocean, the trackless air, the abyss of the infinitely great and

¹² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 299.

¹³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 300.

¹⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 306.

the infinitely small, Nature's vast millions of years, the many, tiny, wretched futilities of the history of men [...]¹⁵

There is attraction in the fixation of attention and the passionate desire to understand, but this desire to penetrate the secrets of the world is, in a way, an attempt to master the frightfulness of the “tiny, wretched futilities” of human histories as they take place in that vast (bottomless, trackless) landscape.

What, more precisely, are we terrified by in “mere createdness”? Part of what is terrifying about “mere createdness,” to refer back to the Nietzsche passage that gives us the mirroring image, is the curse of the life of beasts – which, Nietzsche implies, entails unredeemed insignificance. “Mere” createdness is a meaningless mass of things. The human, in the creature's mirror, is just another thing. And not just a meaningless thing, but a suffering thing (of course, suffering is also, as Barth will go on to elaborate, the source of hope, but only suffering understood under the judgment of God and the Cross. First we have to see that there is the suffering that accompanies the “horribleness of birth and death,”¹⁶ “the brutal realities of birth, sickness, and death”¹⁷).

So far, so existential – but what then makes this terror that we should “recover in the presence of the creature” *saving* for Barth?¹⁸ And from what should we be recovering it?

Directly preceding the point about saving terror, Barth describes the “sad courage” and “desperate optimism” with which “we Europeans” refuse to see the vanity of the creature. He calls this a “reverence for pseudo-life” that entails a *deafness to the cry of Creation* in its beauty and its ugliness, its nobility and its insignificance.¹⁹ There is a voice in the totality of existence, but if we do not hear the cry of Creation as the cry of subjection to vanity, we are deaf to it. The attraction that seeks to penetrate to the secrets of the natural world, in order to answer the riddle of existence, is a misplaced reverence of which we must rid ourselves. This fixation on the outer world, the impulse to penetrate its secrets, this desire to understand it, is actually a symptom of a false reverence and deafness to the voice of creation. This might raise concern about whether Barth is rejecting the possible value of attention to and understanding of the natural world and the implications such a view would have for an ecologically-informed environmental

15 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 306–7.

16 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 299.

17 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 302.

18 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

19 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308.

ethics – but note too that he thinks such attention implies deafness to the voice of creation.

What, then, might hearing this voice entail?

Returning to that mid-point passage with which we began, Barth says that it is “not by such reverence that we are led to the apprehension of the divine secret of the Cosmos” and thus we must “recover that sacred terror in the presence of the creature” that is terrified by mere createdness. The contrast to saving terror is a misplaced reverence. This terror is saving because it frees us from a falsely oriented reverence for pseudo-life and points beyond the “interminable interplay which is the mark of createdness” to the problem that is “the Creation in the creature, God in the cosmos.”²⁰ Why a problem? Because to see the Creation in the creature, God in the cosmos is to see that the creature is subject to vanity *by God*. In other words, Barth is not positing here a kind of divine presence in nature as such, but the reality of God’s action – an action that subjects creatures to suffering. At the same time, precisely here, in this affirmation, emerges hope. The saving terror in the presence of the creature is a recognition of the subjection to vanity and the bondage of corruption – but a subjection and a bondage enacted by God in hope.²¹

I will come back to the substance of this hope, but for now I want to linger with the question of the solidarity humans recognize with creatures, and this question about the voice of Creation. Much eco-theology emphasizes the importance of “listening” to Creation in a way distinct from the human narration of Creation’s meaning, so for eco-theological purposes it is critical to understand the ways in which Barth does and does not think Creation “speaks” and the ways in which he thinks humans do and do not “hear.” Indeed, there is a tension between different kinds of solidarity with creation Barth thinks humans see and hear. Just as the “mirroring” opens up two kinds of reflection (misplaced reverence or saving terror), so too it opens up two kinds of solidarity.

3 Solidarity

In the mirroring image, humanity learns about its own createdness by looking at creation. This opens onto solidarity between all creatures in their createdness, but it retains an apparently human narcissistic dimension. The more human be-

²⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

²¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309. Hope “of the restoration of the unobservable union between the Creator and the creature, through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.”

ings attend to the world in trying to penetrate its secrets, the more they discover “their own unquiet.”²² The language of the cosmos “turns out to be, when once it is deciphered, a strangely human tongue.”²³ Does this solidarity that we see in the mirroring image, then, ultimately assimilate the diverse particularities of creatures into the human tongue? This seems to be a solidarity that issues from anthropomorphism and thus plays into anthropocentrism.

But note that for Barth, this is a partially warped articulation of the solidarity between humanity and all creatures. When humans probe their perception, their observation and discovery and research and experience, “They know the cosmos to be theirs; they seek to find their rest in Nature and in History.” And instead of finding rest, they find their own unquiet. And precisely in this context, the “language of the creatures and elements [...] turns out to be [...] a strangely human tongue.”²⁴ There is a truth to the discovery of their own unquiet – it’s not that the confrontation with their own unquiet is false. But it’s important to note that they discover it in their own tongue because they set out to know the cosmos as their own and as their resting place. Of course, for Barth, “knowing the cosmos to be theirs” and seeking to find their rest in Nature or History are fundamentally idolatrous errors. And so, too, we might infer, is the idea that the language of creatures is a human tongue – even if the unquiet they discover is real. This insight actually runs against a kind of human interpretive domination of creation, as if the cosmos might be subject to human mastery, whether practical or semiotic.

If we look earlier in the commentary on Romans 8, we see how this discovery of humanity’s own unquiet in the search for knowledge and rest coheres with Barth’s explicit denial of any natural theological continuity between creation and Creator: “There is no sign here of ‘germ-cells’ or of ‘emanations’ of divinity. There is nothing here of that overflowing, bubbling life in which we think we can discover a continuity of existence between us and God.”²⁵ Only in and of the spirit “is the hiddenness and clarity and peace whereby the bondage which men suppose to be their freedom is measured. What a surging mass of unquiet is that other hiddenness and clarity and satisfaction in which men seek and find their rest!”²⁶ When humans seek their rest in resolving the riddle of existence, in Nature and History, when they seek cosmic knowledge on their own human terms, they will find only their own unquiet.

²² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307.

²³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307.

²⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307.

²⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 296.

²⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297.

There is a sense in which the “strangely human tongue” in which humans encounter their own unquiet is actually fitting. Insofar as humans try to answer the riddle of existence through their own scientific discovery (in their own merely human tongue) and to try to find their rest in Nature in that sense, it is apt that they will hear whatever they hear in their own tongue – but that reflects the self-absorption of the starting point. When creation speaks, in this strangely human tongue, “of beauty and disgust, of peace and war, of life and death, of finiteness and infinity, of good and evil,” Barth writes that it “seems *as though* the contradictions, so well known to us, were also theirs [...] *as though* our sufferings were theirs, and our diseases also theirs.”²⁷ The repeated “as though” in this passage indicates the anthropomorphic analogy through which human beings recognize this shared suffering. It is a feature of their narcissism and at the same time, this “as though” has a real basis: the unquiet that humans hear “in a strangely human tongue” is *not simply their own*. Nature is not simply a mirror for humanity’s unquiet – Nature is subject to the same unquiet to which humanity is subject. For Barth, the unquiet is fundamental to createdness, in which humanity shares. All creation shares in the “dislocation and longing and vanity” occasioned by “createdness itself,” which animates the “unsatisfied hope of resurrection.”²⁸ Createdness itself, which marks all creatures, marks their shared unquiet – the “perpetual interaction of energy and matter, of coming into being and passing to corruption, of organization and decomposition, of thirst for life and the necessity of death: this bondage of corruption which encompasses all living creatures [...]”²⁹ In the “as though,” human beings recognize the shared ambiguity of created existence and this can open onto their recognition of a shared subjection to vanity and bondage. In the “as though,” human beings recognize the shared ambiguity of created existence and this can open not only onto human narcissistic projection, deaf to creation, but onto their recognition of a shared subjection to vanity and bondage, in the face of which humans experience saving terror.

We have made our way back again to the mid-point passage with which we started. Recognizing that all creation is bound to corruption, subject to divine judgment in the vanity of existence, is essential to recovering “that clarity of sight” (Barth cross-references Romans 1:20 here) by which “is discovered in the cosmos the invisibility of God.”³⁰ The “sacred terror” in the presence of the creature is precisely a movement *against* idolizing either the human or the creature, for createdness is marked by bondage and vanity, the boundary be-

27 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 307, emphasis mine.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308.

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308.

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

tween creature and Creator. So the mirroring image opens onto both a misconstrued solidarity – the idea that humans can solve the riddle of their own existence by penetrating the secrets of Nature – and a true solidarity, in the sense that the unquiet they encounter, mirrored to them in createdness, is the unquiet they share with all creatures. Neither the human by their empirical and intellectual powers, nor the creature as such (or in its totality as Nature and History) can solve the riddle or put to rest the unquiet. They are all subject to this riddling unquiet, this ambiguity of existence with all of its contrasts, its interminable interplay, its perpetual interaction.

So far, so Barthian: there is a kind of displacement of the human even in the anthropomorphic analogies in which they discover their solidarity with creatures, because they confront the vast ambiguity of existence as such, and their incapacity to resolve its riddles. Hearing the cry of creation in this sense is critical to recognizing a suffering solidarity that undoes both the idolization of human knowledge and of Nature as such as an answer to the riddle of existence. This is the negative side of hearing the voice of creation in which we confront the reality of our participation in createdness, which, when we hear it fully, is also the cry of subjection to vanity.

But, as we may recall, the recognition not just of the shared condition of unquiet createdness but of subjection to vanity opens onto hope. It opens onto hope precisely because that subjection is a divine action. The suffering by which “the whole created world of men and of things is controlled, is His, His action, His question, and His answer. For this reason, the creature is placed under hope.”³¹ From apprehending the creature’s subjection to vanity by God emerges “hope for the restoration of the unobservable union between the Creator and the creature, through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. Once the utter bondage is recognized, then freedom is seen. Once perceive the frightfulness of corruption, and there is hope of resurrection.”³² This is the way that terror in the face of mere createdness is “saving”: it is critical to hear the voice of created unquiet, to experience the saving terror in the presence of shared createdness, in order to see our shared bondage, in order to see – finally – freedom.

The anthropomorphic “as though,” the mode in which humans see their own contradictions, sufferings, and diseases as creation’s, allows humans to see the shared bondage with creation. This anthropomorphic analogy in which suffering solidarity is perceived and named is integral to affirming redemptive solidarity: only in recognizing bondage can we see freedom. So in recognizing

³¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

³² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309.

the bondage as shared with all creatures, we can then see freedom as shared as well.

We might still be inclined to criticize this anthropomorphizing analogical mode, from an eco-theological perspective. We might also be inclined to wonder whether the anthropomorphic dimension risks propping up human vanity rather than forcing them to confront their subjection to vanity along with all creatures; if Barth is worried about human ego, a sense that “the cosmos is theirs,” does this anthropomorphic path to solidarity help? Barth's concern is with the priority of divine agency and the eco-theologian's concern is with the agency of the more-than-human. Both seem to cast doubt on the judiciousness of rooting solidarity on anthropomorphism (albeit from different starting points). There may nevertheless be ground for a constructive enrichment on both sides.

First, I want to suggest that from an ecological perspective, anthropomorphic analogies may be more constructive than they are often taken to be. The French environmental philosopher Baptiste Morizot argues that anthropomorphic analogies are not inherently disrespectful of creaturely particularities; they may positively interpret nonhuman creatures in richly textured ways.³³ I'll turn briefly to Morizot's account of anthropomorphic metaphorology to then return to how we might think about Barth's anthropomorphic description of creation's unquiet.

Morizot published *Les Diplomates (The Diplomats)* in 2016, in which he develops a theory of environmental relations as ecological diplomacy, drawing dominantly on the questions of cohabiting with wolves.³⁴ An experienced tracker himself, Morizot elaborates a set of ethological and spiritual practices that facilitate understanding and cohabitation. In particular, he notes the ways in which anthropomorphic metaphors and analogies can yield more complex understanding of animal behavior (a central example is the study of Yellowstone wolf packs that draws on feudal and dynastic analogies).³⁵ This method captures observed realities about creatures that mere data analysis does not, and allows for finer, more varied, more nuanced portraits. But this approach relies on personification.

³³ Baptiste Morizot, *Les Diplomates. Cohabiter avec les loups sur une autre carte du vivant* (Marseille : Wildproject, 2016), 158–65. For a full discussion of the book, see Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, “Exploring New and Renewed Eco-Spiritualities: French Contributions to Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47/4 (2019): 790–817.

³⁴ I note in passing that the return of the wolf to the French countryside in the 1990s has posed a threat to domestic herds, sheep, predominantly, and their presence – and the manner it should be treated – is highly controversial.

³⁵ Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 146–59.

He recognizes the protest that this is sure to generate: are these not anthropomorphic projections?³⁶

In response to this concern, Morizot distinguishes two kinds of anthropomorphism, for he claims, “anthropomorphism is an analogical method like any other” and “subject to the same epistemological norms as any other analogy”: it is always “strictly hypothetical” and subject to further comparison and contestation.³⁷ The first anthropomorphism falsely interprets the animal – passing too quickly from superficial observation to human analogy. This anthropomorphism occludes the particularity of the animal. But the second is a “diplomatic” anthropomorphism based on long and detailed observation. It yields an analogical reasoning that generates understanding through an “*ascesis* [...] of prolonged observation”³⁸ and silent attention that precedes interpretation.³⁹ This second type is a form of respect: it interprets creatures using “methods and concepts as elaborate as those we have elaborated for ourselves.”⁴⁰ The challenge is to do justice to an “intimate alterity”⁴¹: the relationship with a creature one may recognize as at once like and unlike. Morizot thus sketches a kind of “spiritual exercise” of observation that can orient anthropomorphic analogy to foster understanding across life-forms.⁴² So Morizot articulates an “anthropomorphic metaphorology” that interprets the more-than-human world in rich ways that contribute to deeper understanding and relationship.⁴³

What use is this for reading Barth constructively for environmental concerns? If Barth is worried about valorizing human empirical observation, it would seem that spiritualizing precisely this kind of empirical observation would be highly problematic on his terms. I’m certainly not proposing that we should import Morizot’s framework wholesale into a reading of Barth – the ethical theories are radically distinct. Nevertheless, it gives us a way into reading Barth’s anthropomorphic analogies in a more environmentally constructive way.

36 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 156.

37 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 158. Translations are my own.

38 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 162.

39 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 163–64.

40 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 159.

41 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 159.

42 Morizot, *Les Diplomates*, 165.

43 I note that I also discuss this in the context of an eco-theological reading of certain anthropomorphic imagery in Augustine’s commentaries on the Psalms. See Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, “Reading Augustine’s Commentaries on the Psalms,” *Patristic Biblical Commentary in Context: Exploring the Genres of Early Christian Interpretation*, eds. Miriam DeCock and Elizabeth Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), forthcoming.

The first point is simply this: anthropomorphic analogies for recognizing shared realities between creatures are not, according to Morizot, inherently problematic from an environmental philosophical perspective. They can contribute in important ways to recognizing both likeness and unlikeness between humans and other creatures as well as to understanding other creatures as such. Barth's "mirroring" suggestion, then, although it is geared towards a theological (rather than an ethological) understanding of creation, is not necessarily or inherently ecologically problematic just by virtue of its anthropomorphism. Second, Barth's "mirroring" image is two-sided. It opens up two kinds of anthropomorphism: first, a superficial (and self-aggrandizing) anthropomorphism, in which humans see the cosmos as their own in ways that make them deaf to the cry of creation. Second, an anthropomorphism that recognizes their shared condition in its most profound significance – that is, as "mere creatures" who, when they see their createdness in light of revelation, see themselves as groaning together as in waiting together on deliverance. In this expression of solidarity, all creatures (not just humans) participate in the existential tribulation that Barth calls a parable and an analogy of Christ's death, in which the hidden God gives Godself to be known.⁴⁴ This analogy of the cross is only significant insofar as it is seen in light of the resurrection. Just as the ambiguity of existence is only fully seen when it is seen – in light of revelation – as bondage, and this bondage can only be recognized in light of the promised deliverance, the analogy of the cross can only be seen in light of the resurrection. The anthropomorphic analogy that expresses the continuity of created tribulation allows a full participation of all creation in the analogy of the cross, insofar as God's action (subjection and promise) encompasses creation.

Can we take Barth this far? In fact, we can go further still. Barth goes beyond solidarity in the shared condition of subjection and bondage and the shared activities of groaning and waiting when he evokes an "all-pervading unity."⁴⁵ This unity is rooted in that "every created, temporal thing [...] bears its eternal existence in itself as unborn, eternal Future, and seeks to give it that birth which can never take place in time."⁴⁶ Although Barth does not elaborate this at any length, it seems (and this is further bolstered by the resonance with Romans 1:20) that he draws all of creation into the dialectic of time and eternity, of the old and new creation, of death and resurrection, of veiling and unveiling, that animates the entire *Römerbrief*.

⁴⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 260.

⁴⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 310.

⁴⁶ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 310.

It would seem, then, that we could say on Barth's terms that the veil in which God reveals Godself in Jesus is not just the veil of Jesus's humanity but also Jesus's createdness, Jesus's participation in the ambiguity of the whole of creaturely existence. And I wonder if this allows us to invert the analogical order. Note that I do not mean an inversion of the order of analogy from above to below, which is never possible on Barth's terms. The vertical order remains as irreversible as the radical distinction between Creator and creature. I mean, rather, an inversion on the horizontal plane, from the way in which an anthropomorphic analogy interprets creation's participation in suffering. Can we invert the horizontal analogies insofar as they move from the human to nonhuman, to a movement from the nonhuman to the human? If we can, by graced revelation, hear the groan of creation in human words – crying *Abba, Father*, under the analogy of the cross – might we affirm (beyond what Barth suggests in the text) the possibility of eco-morphic analogies that speak of this suffering we share not in a “strangely human tongue” but in tongues (and all manner of signs) strange to humans? Might humans hear in the groaning of creation not just the analogy of the cross spoken in their own human words, not in *words* at all but in signifiers of another order, and yet just as parabolically significant insofar as they stand under the grace on which all revelation depends? Barth seems to open up this possibility when he says that “the creature sighs *until now*, and in so doing makes reference to the truth which is revealed in Christ, interpreting our temporal life to those who have ears to hear both as this present time and as the opportunity of eternity. Have we now heard the groaning of the creature, which, if we interpret it aright, tells us all we need to hear?”⁴⁷ In this passage, we leave behind the strangely human tongue, we leave behind the human words *Abba, Father*, and we listen – if we have but ears to hear – to the truth revealed in Christ in the sighs and groans of the creature. If we were to extend this eco-morphically, perhaps we could say, without violating Barth's terms, that we would hear this truth not just in sounds like sighs and groans, which nonhuman animals make, but in the splintering of tree boughs, in the cracking of melting ice sheets, in the roaring of wildfires, in the silence of a spring radically diminished in birdsong or bees (and we could go on).

How do we “listen” to such sighs and groans? Perhaps we might come back to the kind of attention to the more-than-human world that Morizot describes, but transposed as a prolonged attention in which we allow ourselves to be graciously displaced to hear aright the sighs and groans of creatures in their present

⁴⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 310–11.

and eternal significance.⁴⁸ And such a displacement might allow us to recover a tension between the likeness of created solidarity and the unlikeness of creaturely particularities, a tension we risk losing sight of with Barth in this text, in the mass of “createdness” and “existence as such.” Such a displacement might yield eco-morphic analogies of the cross and the resurrection in which light it must be understood – analogies that come to us from above to below but not to us in our own words but in sighs and signifiers strange to us, and yet that speak of a shared subjection from which we wait to be delivered. Such an analogical inversion coheres with a version of divine alterity that is always strange to the one thus encountered.

In this interplay between anthropomorphic and eco-morphic analogies, we might recover both the likeness and unlikeness of creatures with one another. Creatures stand, in their fundamental likeness (createdness) in radical distinction to their Creator. But if we maintain the importance of their particularities, their unlikenesses one from another, and attend to them, this very interplay of likeness and unlikeness participates in the analogy of the cross in which Jesus dies both like and unlike the creatures who wait on the restoration of the union between the Creator and the creature through his Cross and Resurrection.

I have offered an ecological reading of Barth's commentary on Romans 8:18–25. This doesn't in itself yield a clear environmental ethic, insofar as we typically understand it. But then, neither does Romans itself.⁴⁹ What Romans offers is a strong affirmation of created continuity in both suffering and expectation in God. And Barth follows Romans in that strong affirmation. This reading of Barth's *Römerbrief* thus contributes to the basis for environmental theological reflection with Barth and, perhaps more importantly, environmental theological construction in a Barthian framework. The politically active Barth would, we can only hope, have wanted to see theologians and churches responding to the environmental concerns that risk radically upending the temporal orders we know in the coming decades.

48 This attention can encompass the aims of ethological and ecological understanding, so long as it stands under divine possibility and action rather than independent human initiatives to penetrate Nature's secrets.

49 Hunt, Horrell and Southgate, “An Environmental Mantra?”

Claudia Welz

Das Problem der Ethik in Karl Barths Römerbriefkommentar – im Vergleich mit Søren Kierkegaards Ethik der Liebe

Abstract: This paper focuses on Karl Barth's 1922 interpretation of Chapters 12–13 in Paul's letter to the Romans. Here Barth discusses what he calls "the problem of ethics," which he defines as the disturbance of human action, which is disturbed by God himself. As Barth's chapters contain remarkable references to Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* (1847), Barth's and Kierkegaard's respective approaches to a theological foundation or grounding of ethics will be compared in regard to structural similarities in their methodology. In particular, the following three questions will be explored: 1. How do Barth and Kierkegaard understand the relation between human and divine action? 2. In what ways do they connect the love of God with the love of neighbor? 3. Last but not least, how do they relate action in the existing world to its transformation in the coming world?

1 Einleitung

Karl Barths grandioses rhetorisches Feuerwerk in seinem Römerbriefkommentar kann dazu führen, dass die etwas leiseren Töne überhört werden. Auf Letztere möchte ich besonders aufmerksam lauschen, ihren Konnotationen nachspüren und zuweilen auch das Ungesagte in Worte zu fassen suchen. Gerade da, wo Barth den Kopenhagener Theologen, Philosophen und Schriftsteller Søren Kierkegaard zitiert, ist Wachsamkeit geboten. Zwar setzt er einzelne Begriffe und Sätze in Anführungszeichen und nennt in Klammern den Namen des Dänen, doch fehlen Fußnoten mit genauen Hinweisen. Kundigen Leser_innen wird nichtsdestotrotz schnell aufgehen, dass Barth vor allem ein Werk Kierkegaards zitiert: *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger* (1847), zu Deutsch: *Die Taten der Liebe* bzw. *Der Liebe Tun*. Und seine Auswahl von Referenzen ist vielsagend, bezeugt sie doch *strukturelle* Ähnlichkeiten in der methodologischen Grundlegung der Ethik bei Barth und Kierkegaard. In einem Vergleich werde ich drei Leitfragen nachgehen:

1. Wie verhalten sich menschliches Handeln und göttliches Wirken zueinander?
2. Auf welche Weise wird die Liebe zu Gott mit der Liebe zum Mitmenschen verknüpft?
3. Wie wird menschliches Handeln in der bestehenden Welt zu dessen Transformation in der kommenden Welt ins Verhältnis gesetzt?

In meiner Barth-Lektüre werde ich mich auf dessen Auslegung von Röm 12–13 in der zweiten Auflage des Römerbriefkommentars von 1922 konzentrieren und sie mit Kierkegaards Ethik der Liebe vergleichen. Kierkegaards Buch enthält, wie sein Untertitel zeigt, *Etlliche christliche Erwägungen in Form von Reden*¹ und ist in zwei Folgen aufgeteilt. Während Barth sich vor allem auf die Reden im ersten Band stützt, werde ich beide Bände einbeziehen, um nicht nur Barths Kierkegaard-Inspiration, sondern auch Unterschiede zwischen den ethischen Zugängen der beiden aufzeigen zu können.

2 Menschliches Handeln und göttliches Wirken

Das 12.–15. Kapitel des paulinischen Römerbriefs überschrieb Barth in seinem Kommentar mit den Worten „*Die große Störung*“.² Interessanterweise ist es „der Gedanke an Gott selbst,“ der Barth zufolge stört; gestört wird „alles menschliche Tun“, und in dieser Störung besteht das „Problem der Ethik“.³ Dieses Problem betrifft das „Leben des Menschen in Natur und Kultur,“⁴ wobei Barths dialektische Denken nach „Tiefe, Zusammenhang und Realität des Lebens“ fragt und sich auf „den Sinn des Lebens“ besinnt.⁵ Barth will Gott im Kontext alltäglicher Konkretion und lebensweltlicher Komplexität denken. Er zeichnet das Denken Gottes ein in die existenziellen Koordinaten des Menschseins und stellt Letztere in Frage. Seine Infragestellung des Menschlich-Allzumenschlichen erinnert an Kierkegaards polemische Entgegenstellung einer „bloß menschliche[n] Betrachtung“ und einer vom Christentum geleiteten.⁶ So heißt es bei Kierkegaard: „der

1 Dass Kierkegaard seine theologische Ethik in Form von Reden vorbringt, hat einen guten Grund. Wie Ulrich Lincoln gezeigt hat, entwickelt Kierkegaard seine Ethik als „dialektische Rhetorik“, um bei seinem Publikum Glauben an die Liebe zu wecken, s. „Christliche Ethik als expressive Theorie humaner Praxis. Zur Methode in Kierkegaards *Die Taten der Liebe*“, in *Ethik der Liebe. Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“*, hg. Ingolf U. Dalferth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 1–18, 4. Vermittels einer „expressiven Methode“ soll die Liebe selbst zur Sprache kommen in Form von Sprech- und Zeichenhandlungen (13).

2 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, ¹⁵1989), 447.

3 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 447.

4 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 447.

5 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 448.

6 Vgl. Sören Kierkegaard, *Der Liebe Tun. Etlliche christliche Erwägungen in Form von Reden*, Band 1, *Erste Folge* in *Gesammelte Werke*, 19. Abt., hg. Emanuel Hirsch und Hayo Gerdes (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, ³1998), 159.

Christ muß alles anders verstehen als der Nicht-Christ“.⁷ Kierkegaards ethische Leitdifferenz ist diejenige zwischen Menschen, die Christen sind, und solchen, die es nicht sind – und diese Unterscheidung hat Konsequenzen für das eigene Selbst-, Welt- und Gottesverständnis sowie die Lebensorientierung im Ganzen, sofern für Christen nicht der Mensch das Maß aller Dinge ist, sondern Gottes Liebe.⁸

Das Problem der Ethik erinnert Barth an die in keinem Augenblick selbstverständliche „Wahrheit Gottes,“ und das Pauluswort von Röm 12,1 – „Ich ermahne euch, Brüder!“ – deutet Barth als Aufforderung dazu, sich im eigenen Denken unterbrechen zu lassen, „damit es ein Denken *Gottes* sei“, sowie als Aufforderung dazu, sich unterbrechen zu lassen in der Dialektik, „damit sie dialektisch *bleibe*“.⁹ Wir sollen also sowohl im theologischen wie im ethischen Denken innehalten und unsere Denkkakte von Gott daraufhin überprüfen lassen, ob sie seinem Willen entsprechen. Dieser auf die Dogmatik bauende Zugang zur Ethik entspricht Kierkegaards Konzept einer Ethik der Liebe auf theologischer Grundlage, die von Arne Grøn als Kierkegaards ‚zweite Ethik‘ bezeichnet wurde.¹⁰

Dieser Ausdruck stammt von Kierkegaards Pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis, dem ‚Wächter Kopenhagens‘, der in der Einleitung zum *Begriff Angst* (1844) behauptet, die erste Ethik setze die Metaphysik voraus, die zweite die Dogmatik: „Die erste Ethik ignoriert die Sünde, die zweite Ethik hat die Wirklichkeit der Sünde innerhalb ihres Bereichs“.¹¹ Kierkegaards ‚erste Ethik‘ findet sich z. B. in *Entweder – Oder* (1843) und *Furcht und Zittern* (1843), wo die Sphäre der Ethik schematisch von der Ästhetik und Religion abgegrenzt wird. Im *Begriff Angst* heißt es, dass die Ethik am Begriff der Sünde strandet.¹² Wie die Ethik nach ihrem Zusammenbruch durch die Sünde aussieht, sieht man in *Der Liebe Tun*. Der Ausgangspunkt ist hier das menschliche Scheitern, was auch ein Scheitern an der Liebe ist, denn wir können die Forderung der Nächstenliebe nicht erfüllen. Lieben wir wirklich, haben wir kein Verdienst. Kierkegaards ‚zweite Ethik‘ gründet in der reformatorischen Rechtfertigungslehre und der Erfahrung der Vergebung.

7 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, 54.

8 Vgl. Ingolf U. Dalferth, „...der Christ muß alles anders verstehen als der Nicht-Christ...“ Kierkegaards Ethik des Unterscheidens“, in *Ethik der Liebe. Studien zu Kierkegaards „Taten der Liebe“*, hg. Ingolf U. Dalferth (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 19–46, 29–33.

9 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 449.

10 Vgl. Arne Grøn, „Kierkegaards ‚zweite‘ Ethik“, in *Kierkegaard Studies Yearbook 1998*, 358–68, 363.

11 Sören Kierkegaard, *Der Begriff Angst*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 11. und 12. Abt., hg. Emanuel Hirsch und Hayo Gerdes (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1995), 21.

12 Kierkegaard, *Angst*, 14.

Für Barth ist das Problem der Ethik mit einer „ungelöste[n] Frage“ an den Menschen verbunden: „Wie können wir leben? Was sollen wir tun?“¹³ Es mag etwas seltsam anmuten, dass Barth die Antwort nicht in dieser oder jener Lebenspraxis sucht, sondern in „Christus“, dem „Erbarmen Gottes“.¹⁴ Soll Christus unsere ethischen Probleme lösen und das tun, was wir eigentlich selbst tun sollten? Barth legt hier Röm 12,1–2 aus, wo Paulus seine römischen Geschwister zur ‚sachgemäßen Gottesverehrung‘ ermahnt, ohne sich zu fügen in die bestehende Gestalt dieser Welt, wohl aber in ihre kommende Verwandlung durch Einsicht in den Willen Gottes. In diesen Versen steht ein klarer Imperativ. Und doch kann die Ermahnung nur dann erfüllt werden, wenn etwas geschieht, was kein Mensch allein vollbringen kann: sein Erneuertwerden. Die geforderte Aktivität ruht in einer Passivität. Die Verwandlung des Menschen wird herbeigeführt durch göttliches Erbarmen, was zugleich eine Kritik dessen enthält, was der von Gott gewollten neuen Welt nicht entspricht. Barth betont: Wenn es „zu *Ethik* kommen soll“, ist nichts anderes möglich als eine „*Kritik* alles Ethos“.¹⁵ Diese Kritik enthält auch Selbstkritik. Wie Barth (sicher nicht ohne Augenzwinkern) anmerkt: „Wer nicht in der Lage ist, etwas ‚gegen‘ andere zu sagen, ohne gleichzeitig sich selbst zu erledigen, der schweige in der Gemeinde“.¹⁶ Dies gilt wohlgermerkt nicht nur für Frauen.

Barth macht auf etwas Allgemeinmenschliches aufmerksam: dass ‚Ermahnung‘ nie nur Forderung ist, sondern „Geltendmachen der *Gnade* als Forderung, *Geltenlassen* dessen, was ist, wie es ist, um deswillen, was es nicht ist. *Gnade* heißt: nicht richten, weil schon gerichtet *ist*“.¹⁷ Nur aufgrund von Gottes *Gnade* kann von uns etwas gefordert werden; und selbst wenn wir der Forderung nicht nachkommen können, werden wir nicht verdammt, da das Gericht bereits in Christus vorweggenommen ist. Barth macht die *Gnade* als Forderung geltend. Das Empfangen dieser *Gnade* verpflichtet den Menschen. Gerade im schlechten Gewissen sieht er die „neue Möglichkeit eines (nie und nirgends ‚guten‘!) *getrösteten* Gewissens“.¹⁸ Kierkegaard versteht die Liebe direkt als „*Sache des Gewissens*“,¹⁹ sofern sich der Mensch im Gewissen auch zu Gott verhält.

13 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 450.

14 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 450.

15 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 451.

16 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 451.

17 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 451.

18 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 452.

19 Kierkegaard, *Der Liebe Tun*, Bd. 1, 159. Siehe hierzu Claudia Welz, „Keeping the Secret of Subjectivity: Kierkegaard and Levinas on Conscience, Love, and the Limits of Self-Understanding“, in *Despite Oneself: Subjectivity and its Secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas*, hg. Claudia Welz

Ganz ähnlich wie Barth besteht auch Kierkegaard darauf, dass das lutherische *sola gratia* der Rechtfertigung *allein aus Gnade* nichtsdestotrotz Werke des Menschen zur Folge haben muss, so wie ein guter Baum auch gute Früchte bringt.²⁰ Die Normendiskussion ist bei Kierkegaard schon beantwortet, denn wir wissen, *was wir tun sollen*. Die Hauptfrage der Ethik Kierkegaards ist dagegen: *Wie soll ich tun, was ich tun soll?* Diese Ethik ist „keine Ethik der Subjektivität, keine Tugend- oder Pflichtenlehre, aber auch keine Werte-, Güter- oder Institutionenethik, sondern eine *Phänomenologie der ethischen Modalität der Lebenshorizonte, in denen Menschen ihr Leben in bestimmten Situationen auf bestimmte Weisen vollziehen*“.²¹ All unser Tun soll ein Tun der Liebe sein – und dies gilt auch dann, wenn wir nichts mehr für einen anderen tun können. Kierkegaard illustriert dies in seiner Umdichtung des Gleichnisses vom barmherzigen Samariter. In der Zweiten Folge seiner Reden steht Rede „VII. Barmherzigkeit, ein Tun der Liebe, selbst wenn sie nichts geben kann, und nichts zu tun vermag“.²² Kierkegaard stellt sich vor,

es wäre nicht ein einzelner Mensch gewesen, der von Jericho nach Jerusalem reiste, sondern es wären zwei gewesen, und beide wären von Räubern überfallen und verstümmelt worden, und kein Reisender wäre vorbeikommen – gesetzt dann, der eine von ihnen hätte nichts anderes gewußt, als zu jammern, während der andere sein eigenes Leiden vergessen und überwunden hätte, um milde und freundliche Worte zu sprechen, oder sich, was mit heftigen Schmerzen verbunden war, zu einem kleinen Wasser hingeschleppt hätte, um dem andern einen Labetrunk zu verschaffen; oder gesetzt, die beiden wären der Sprache beraubt, aber der eine von ihnen hätte in seinem stummen Gebet auch für den andern zu Gott geseufzt: wäre er dann nicht barmherzig gewesen?²³

und Karl Verstrynge (London: Turnshare 2008), 153–225; Dies., „Das Gewissen als Instanz der Selbsterschließung: Luther, Kierkegaard und Heidegger“, *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 53:3 (2011): 265–84.

20 Kierkegaard zitiert Lk 6,44: „Ein jeglicher Baum wird an seinen Früchten erkannt“ und baut auf diesen Vers die Eröffnungsrede seines Buches über *Die Taten der Liebe*, vgl. *Der Liebe Tun*, Bd. 1, 7.

21 Dalferth, „Kierkegaards Ethik des Unterscheidens“, 22. Hier heißt es außerdem: „Im Zentrum von Kierkegaards Interesse steht nicht das *Wer* (das Subjekt) oder das *Was* (die Güter) oder das *Warum* (die Gründe) oder das *Wozu* (die Ziele) oder das *Wodurch* (die Institutionen) des moralischen Handelns, sondern das *Wie* des Lebens bzw. genauer: *die ethische Bestimmung der Situationen, in denen Menschen ihr Leben je und je leben*“. Zu Kierkegaards Ethik der Liebe als Antwort auf das Theodizeeproblem siehe auch Claudia Welz, *Love's Transcendence and the Problem of Theodicy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

22 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 2, 347–63.

23 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 2, 357.

Die empathische Teilnahme am Leiden des anderen und das Vor-Gott-Bringen der Not macht in dieser imaginierten Situation den Unterschied zwischen einer selbstbezogenen und einer liebevoll auf den Anderen bezogenen Reaktion aus. *Der Liebe Tun* ist eine Ethik der *Einübung* in die Liebe; beschrieben wird eine *Praxis*, es geht nicht nur um *Präskriptionen*. Die spezifisch christliche Voraussetzung ist dabei, dass die Liebe schon da ist: als eine Realität Gottes, die sich unter uns manifestieren soll, indem wir sie durch unser eigenes Tun präsent werden lassen.

Barths Ethik wurde als *divine command ethics* charakterisiert, sofern er das göttliche Gebot der Liebe mit menschlichem Gehorsam korreliert, aber lässt dieses Modell noch Raum für moralisches Wachstum auf Seiten des Menschen, und kann es auch im Sinne einer Tugendethik gedeutet werden?²⁴ Was menschliche Hierarchien angeht, unterstreicht Barth, dass man nur von dort aus ermahnen kann, wo Pharisäer und Zöllner „in einer Reihe stehen“,²⁵ d. h. keiner von uns soll glauben, besser zu sein als andere, denn keiner ist moralisch perfekt. „Ermahnung ist nur da möglich, wo des Menschen Recht darauf begründet ist, daß er – unrecht hat, also nur ‚auf Grund der Erbarmungen Gottes‘.“²⁶ Diese Formulierung spielt an auf ein Motiv Kierkegaards im sogenannten „Ultimatum“ von *Entweder – Oder* und in einer *Erbaulichen Rede* von 1847: dass wir als Sünder vor Gott immer Unrecht haben.²⁷

24 Dies wird u. a. von Stanley Hauerwas bestritten, dessen *The Peacable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (1983) sowie Alasdair MacIntyres *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981) in der jüngsten Barth-Forschung mit Tugendethik aristotelischer und thomistischer Prägung verglichen und zu Barths Ethik ins Verhältnis gesetzt wird, vgl. Kirk J. Nolan, *Reformed Virtue after Barth: Developing Moral Virtue Ethics in the Reformed Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) und William Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics: Living in Truth* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) sowie die Rezension beider Bücher durch Pieter Vos in *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie*, Heft 63, Jahrgang 32, Nummer 1, *Barths Römerbrief – damals und heute* (2016), 202–05. Siehe auch den Übersichtsartikel von Pieter Vos, „Calvinists among the Virtues: Reformed Theological Contributions to Contemporary Virtue Ethics“, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28:2 (2015): 201–12.

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 452.

26 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 452.

27 Vgl. Sören Kierkegaard, *Entweder – Oder. Teil I und II*, hg. Hermann Diem und Walter Rest, übers. Heinrich Fauteck (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 62000), 523–933, hier 920–21: „Du darfst gegen Gott nicht recht haben wollen, nur so darfst du mit ihm rechten, daß du lernst, daß du unrecht hast“. Siehe auch die 1847 verfasste Rede über „Das Frohmachende darin, daß ein Mensch im Verhältnis zu Gott stets schuldig leidet“, wo Kierkegaard das „Ultimatum“ noch verschärft, indem er behauptet, dass ein Mensch im Verhältnis zu Gott „stets schuldig ist“ und „schuldig leidet“, *Erbauliche Reden in verschiedenem Geist 1847* in Sören Kierkegaard. *Gesammelte Werke*, übers. und hg. Emanuel Hirsch & Hayo Gerdes (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Ver-

Paulus ermahnt die Römer, ihre Leiber zur Verfügung zu stellen. Barth spricht davon, dass wir als geschichtliche Menschen mit unseren Gliedern „Gehorsam [...] leisten“ sollen.²⁸ Dabei werden wir beschlagnahmt „durch den neuen Menschen in Christus“, ohne dass sich „der alte Mensch des ‚Leibes‘“ entziehen könnte.²⁹ Wir sollen Gott dienen nicht nur mit unserer ganzen Seele, sondern auch mit unserem Körper, der unser Wollen ausdrücken und ausführen kann. Dies soll in einer *imitatio Christi* eine Nachahmung des Vorbildes Christus sein. Das Lebenserneuernde soll siegen und dadurch das Alte, noch im Egoismus der Sünde Gefangene verwandeln. „Gerade diese Begründung und Richtung der ethischen Aufgabe, gerade ihre unaufhebbare Jenseitigkeit ist es, die ihr Ernst und Kraft verleiht“.³⁰ Unser menschliches Handeln soll sich orientieren an dem, der nicht von dieser Welt ist und uns dennoch in ihr vorgelebt hat, was es heißt, ein neuer Mensch zu sein.

Für Barth ist das primäre ethische Handeln die von Paulus genannte sachgemäße Gottesverehrung: Heiligung im Sinne dessen, dass wir uns selbst „für Gott aussondern, bereitstellen“ und uns ihm bedingungslos schenken.³¹ So gesehen ist das Problem der Ethik identisch mit dem der Dogmatik und kann in der Formel *Soli Deo gloria* zusammengefasst werden. Stellen wir uns als „Opfer“ zur Verfügung, ist dies „nicht etwa eine menschliche Handlung, in der sich der Wille Gottes vollstreckte in dem Sinn, daß der Opfernde durch sein Handeln ein Organ Gottes würde“;³² vielmehr ist das Opfer „eine *Demonstration* zur Ehre Gottes“.³³ Wir nehmen teil daran, doch dürfen wir kein „Einswerden des Willens Gottes mit dem Menschenwillen oder umgekehrt ein Aufgehen des zweiten im ersten“³⁴ erwarten. Unser menschliches Handeln soll lediglich auf das göttliche Handeln *hinweisen*: „Eiserne Regel auch für die Ethik: *kein* Zusammenfallen von Akt und Voraussetzung!“³⁵ Was wir tun können, ist niemals identisch mit dem, was unser Tun ermöglicht. Genau wie Kierkegaard, der auf dem himmelweiten Unterschied zwi-

lagshaus, ²1994), 282. Vgl. Claudia Welz, „Das ‚Ultimatum‘: Gottesfrage, Gebet und Ethik angesichts des Theodizeeproblems“, in *Kierkegaards Entweder – Oder (Klassiker auslegen)*, hg. Hermann Deuser und Markus Kleinert (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 247–66.

28 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 452.

29 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 453.

30 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 453.

31 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 454.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 454.

33 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 454–55.

34 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 455.

35 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 455.

schen Gott und Mensch bestand,³⁶ will Barth eine Vermengung von Himmel und Erde verhindern und stattdessen „dabei verharren, Gott Gott und Mensch Mensch zu nennen“.³⁷ Die Trennung der beiden ist jedoch gerade die Möglichkeitsbedingung der Liebe zwischen ihnen. Wären sie von vornherein eins in einem pantheistischen Sinne, könnten sie sich nicht zueinander verhalten. Dann wäre das ‚Gottesverhältnis‘ lediglich ein Selbstgespräch des Absoluten.

Menschliches Handeln soll sich also am göttlichen Wirken orientieren, ohne dass unser Tun dem Tun Gottes jemals gleichkäme. Ganz im Gegenteil: Wir können nur handeln auf der Grundlage dessen, dass Gott bereits an uns gehandelt hat und eine Veränderung unseres Lebens bewirkt hat – dergestalt, dass wir imstande sind, seine Liebe zu uns zu erwidern. Darin sind sich Barth und Kierkegaard einig.

3 Die Liebe zu Gott und die Liebe zum Mitmenschen

Die nächste Frage ist, wie die Liebe zu Gott jeweils mit der Liebe zum Mitmenschen verknüpft wird. Für Barth ist die Voraussetzung der gesamten Ethik, dass Gott Gott ist und der Mensch auf Gott hören kann.³⁸ Seinen Kommentar zu Röm 12,3 eröffnet Barth mit einem 11 Zeilen langen Kierkegaard-Zitat. Barth verrät uns nicht, was er da zitiert. Eine Stichwortsuche in der Online-Ausgabe des dänischen Texts ergibt, dass Barth einerseits Sätze auslässt und andererseits mehrere Stellen aus verschiedenen Quellen zusammenmixt. Ethisch relevant ist einzig jener Teil, der aus Kierkegaards Tagebuch des Jahres 1850 stammt und von der absoluten Hingabe an Gott handelt, aller Anfechtung und allem Widrigen zum Trotz. Der gottesfürchtige Mensch soll aus seinem gesamten Vorstellungskreis und seiner Begriffswelt herausgerissen werden und von Gott lernen, was Liebe ist:

Es fängt damit an, daß Gott die *Liebe* ist, die den Menschen liebt, und dann zeigt es sich, daß *Gott* der ist, der geliebt werden will. Freilich ist Gott kein Egoist, aber er ist das unendliche

36 Vgl. Kierkegaards Notizbuch NB 9:59 (1849) in SKS 21, 235 (*Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter*: <http://sks.dk/forside/indhold.asp>), wo die Rede davon ist, dass ein unendlicher qualitativer Unterschied zwischen Gott und Mensch bestehe, sofern der Mensch gar nichts vermag, Gott ihm aber alles gibt, auch den Glauben.

37 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 455.

38 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 462–63.

Ego, das unmöglich umgebildet werden kann, um dir zu gefallen, sondern *du* mußt umgebildet werden, um *ihm* zu gefallen.³⁹

Die Rede von Gott als unendlichem Ego spielt möglicherweise auf Gottes Selbstvorstellung gegenüber Mose an. Der in Ex 3,14 genannte Gottesname wird in der Vulgata mit *ego sum qui sum* wiedergegeben. In einer Passage, die Barth ausgelassen hat, parallelisiert Kierkegaard Gottes unendliche Egoität mit seiner unendlichen Liebe. Gott habe nur einen geistigen Begriff dessen, was Glück und Seligkeit für den Menschen ist; da der Mensch aber Fleisch und Blut ist, verstehe er nicht ohne Weiteres, dass Gott Liebe ist. Rein menschlich verstanden werde der Mensch unglücklich durch diese Art von Liebe. Soll er selig werden in seinem Verhältnis zu Gott, muss der Mensch umgestaltet werden, und diese Umbildung, ja Wiedergeburt, sei eine prekäre, schmerzhaft Operation, durch die der Mensch Geist werde wie Gott Geist ist.⁴⁰ Das Bild der Wiedergeburt impliziert das passive Involviertsein des Menschen. Menschliches Lieben setzt voraus, dass der Mensch je schon von Gott geliebt ist.

Barth zitiert zudem Kierkegaards Selbstverständnis, „Spion im höchsten Dienste“⁴¹ zu sein, und schreibt dem Apostel Paulus ebenjenes Selbstverständnis zu. Was Barth nicht erwähnt: Kierkegaard vergleicht die Spione, derer die Polizei sich bedient (oft seien dies Verbrecher) mit der Art und Weise, wie Gott sündige Menschen als seine Spione einsetzt. Während Gott seine Spione erziehe und verbessere, denke die Polizei nicht daran, dies zu tun.⁴² Gottes Liebe zu uns inkludiert also eine Einweisung in ein Leben, das ihr entspricht.

Röm 12,3–6 auslegend, wo davon die Rede ist, dass wir in unserer Vielheit ein Leib sind in Christus, zitiert Barth wieder Kierkegaard. Zwei Bibelstellen nennt er in Klammern: zunächst Mk 12,28–31, wo die Frage nach dem höchsten Gebot von Jesus mit Verweis auf das Gebot der Gottesliebe (Dtn 6,4–5) und der Nächstenliebe (Lev 19,18) beantwortet wird. Aber was heißt es, den Nächsten zu lieben wie sich selbst? Die zweite Bibelstelle, Lk 10,25–37, ist Jesu Erzählung vom barmherzigen Samariter, mit welcher er die Frage beantwortet, wer mein ‚Nächster‘ ist: der, dem ich beistehe so wie der Samariter den Mann pflegte, der unter die Räuber gefallen war. Barth zitiert lediglich Kierkegaards Konklusion:

³⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 462. Zitiert wird Kierkegaards Tagebuch NB 20:99 (1850) in SKS 23, 446.

⁴⁰ Vgl. NB 20:99.

⁴¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 462.

⁴² Siehe Kierkegaard, SKS 16, 66, vgl. die Tagebuchaufzeichnung NB 2:124 (August 1847) in SKS 20, 190 sowie NB 5:138 (Juli 1848) in SKS 20, 424–25.

Der Nächste aber ist *jeder* Mensch, denn durch seine Verschiedenheit von andern ist er nicht dein Nächster, auch nicht durch das, worin er innerhalb der Verschiedenheit von andern dir gleich ist. Dadurch, daß er vor *Gott* dir gleich ist, ist er dein Nächster, *diese* Gleichheit aber hat unbedingt *jeder* Mensch und hat sie *unbedingt* (Kierkegaard).⁴³

Ohne nähere Angaben zu machen, zitiert Barth aus der ersten Folge von *Der Liebe Tun*, in welcher das biblische Liebesgebot ausgelegt wird und die Liebe als Pflicht in den Blick kommt. Barths Zitat umfasst die zwei abschließenden Sätze der Rede „I.B. Du sollst den *Nächsten* lieben“.⁴⁴ Nach Kierkegaard ist der Nächste der erste Mensch, den wir treffen, wenn wir die Tür aufmachen, weshalb es „in der ganzen Welt keinen einzigen Menschen“ gebe, „der so sicher und so leicht zu erkennen ist wie der Nächste“.⁴⁵ Wir können nur aufgrund unserer Gleichheit vor Gott Nächste füreinander sein, und vor diesem Hintergrund wird all das belanglos, wodurch wir uns im Übrigen voneinander unterscheiden. Daher benutzt Barth das Kierkegaard-Zitat, um die „Vielheit von Andersheiten“⁴⁶ abzuwerten im Vergleich mit der Gemeinschaft, auf die es ihm ankommt. Als eine Hierarchien ausschließende Gemeinschaft von Menschen, die sich füreinander als ihre jeweils Nächsten erwiesen haben, ist sie *communio sanctorum*, Gemeinschaft der Heiligen, welche die Andersheit des Anderen nicht etwa annulliert, sondern sie fordert und ihr Sinn gibt in einer größeren Einheit: der Einheit des Leibes Christi, dessen Glieder wir sind als unverwechselbare Einzelne.⁴⁷

Auf der Basis von Röm 12,6–8, wonach wir verschiedene Gnadengaben haben, definiert Barth die ethische Aufgabe als Suche der Einheit aller Menschen in Gott, des Friedens jenseits aller Parteiung.⁴⁸ „Also die Begründung der Ethik durch die Konstituierung der Gemeinde als Gemeinschaft?“, fragt Barth und antwortet bejahend: „Die Gemeinde wird gebildet durch die Einzelnen in ihrer Beziehung zu Gott“.⁴⁹ Es gehört bekanntlich zum Markenzeichen Kierkegaards, dass er sich in seinen Reden an *hiin Enkelte* wendet, jenen Einzelnen, der jeweils

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 466.

44 Barth hat selbst die Kursivierungen eingefügt. Vgl. hiermit die Neuübersetzung von Hayo Gerdes: „Der Nächste ist jeder Mensch; denn durch die Verschiedenheit ist er nicht dein Nächster, auch nicht durch die Gleichheit mit dir innerhalb der Verschiedenheit von anderen Menschen. Durch die Gleichheit mit dir vor Gott ist er dein Nächster, aber diese Gleichheit hat unbedingt jeder Mensch und hat sie unbedingt.“ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 69.

45 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 59.

46 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 466.

47 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 467.

48 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 468–69.

49 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 473.

sein Leser ist.⁵⁰ Bei Barth dient der Bezug auf das Individuum *vor Gott* der Bekämpfung der Gefahr des „Titanismus“.⁵¹

In seiner Auslegung von Röm 12,9–15, wo Paulus dazu auffordert, aufrichtig zu lieben, das Böse zu verabscheuen, sich an das Gute zu halten und die Verfolger zu segnen, betont Barth, dass dies positive Möglichkeiten ethischen Wollens und Tuns sind.⁵² Barth sieht die Liebe des Menschen zum Mitmenschen als eine sekundäre ethische Handlung, welche die primäre ethische Handlung der Liebe zu Gott nicht nur fortsetzt und übersetzt, sondern geradezu realisiert: „Anbetung *bedeutet* Liebe zu Gott“, sofern sie „sich *bedeutungsvoll betätigt* in einem der Liebe zu Gott entsprechenden anschaulichen Tun“ gegenüber dem Mitmenschen.⁵³ Barths Gründung der Menschenliebe in der Gottesliebe findet eine Entsprechung bei Kierkegaard, der sein Buch über die Liebe mit einem Gebet eröffnet, in welchem er Gott mit der rhetorischen Frage anspricht: „Wie sollte man auf rechte Art von Liebe reden können, falls du vergessen wärest, du Gott der Liebe, von dem alle Liebe herkommt im Himmel und auf Erden; [...] so daß der Liebende ist, was er ist, nur durch Bleiben in dir!“⁵⁴

Eine weitere Strukturanalogie betrifft die Bestimmung des Verhältnisses zwischen dem Wesen und der Manifestation der Liebe. Für Barth stellt sich mit der Liebe die Frage, was gut und was böse ist. Liebe ist „kraft ihres unvermeidlichen Rekurrerens auf die Liebe zu *Gott* [,] nie das scheinbar Eindeutige, Direkte, Unmißverständliche, nach dem die Sentimentalen schreien“; nur „die Liebe, die die Kraft hat, das Böse zu verabscheuen, hat auch die Kraft, sich an das Gute zu klammern“.⁵⁵ Dies impliziert, dass die Erscheinungsformen nicht immer identisch sind mit dem Wesen der Liebe. Die Liebe kann durchaus in zweideutigen Formen auftreten. Kierkegaard führt in die Ambiguität der ‚äußeren‘ Formen der Liebe ein, indem er die Eröffnungsrede seines Buches wie folgt betitelt: „Das verborgene Leben der Liebe und dessen Kenntlichkeit an den Früchten“.⁵⁶ Die Früchte stehen für das, was sichtbar wird von der Liebe. Ihr Ursprung im Innersten eines Menschen bleibt jedoch unsichtbar.⁵⁷ Kierkegaard zufolge gibt es kein bestimmtes Aussehen oder „Solcherart“, welches das Dasein der Liebe beweisen könnte.⁵⁸

50 Vgl. die Vorworte zu Kierkegaards *Erbaulichen* bzw. *Christlichen Reden* und zu *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 5.

51 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 468 und 474.

52 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 474–75.

53 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 476.

54 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 6.

55 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 478.

56 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 7.

57 Vgl. Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 11.

58 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 17.

Man kann sie nicht an bestimmten Worten (z. B. einer Liebeserklärung) oder Taten (z. B. einer Eheschließung) ablesen. Vielmehr ist das einzige „unbedingt überzeugende Kennzeichen der Liebe“ die Liebe selbst, „die erkannt und wieder erkannt wird von der Liebe in einem andern“.⁵⁹ Man muss an die Liebe glauben, sonst merkt man überhaupt nicht, dass sie da ist.⁶⁰ Somit sind sich Barth und Kierkegaard einig darin, dass die Liebe zum anderen Menschen nur dann gelingen kann, wenn wir zugleich mit Gott als Quelle aller menschlichen Liebe verbunden bleiben.

4 Die bestehende und die kommende Welt

Aus dem primären ethischen Handeln zur Ehre Gottes fließen für Barth die „sich daran anschließenden sekundären Handlungen“ des „nicht-triumphierenden, nicht-rechthabenden Menschen“, der sich – mit Paulus gesprochen – nicht fügen soll „in die Gestalt dieser Welt, wohl aber in ihre Verwandlung“.⁶¹ Diese unsere jetzige Weltzeit, dieser ‚Äon‘, die bestehende Welt, in der wir leben, vergeht (vgl. 1 Kor 7,31). Barth zufolge besteht das Ethische einer Handlung in der „Überwindung des Menschen“, so dass sie „das Licht des kommenden Tages“ erscheinen lässt – jedoch nur „beinahe“, und Barth fügt relativierend hinzu: „Es bleibt dabei, daß alle Handlung als solche nur [...] *Gleichnis* und *Zeugnis* ist vom Handeln Gottes, das, weil es das Handeln *Gottes* ist, nur [...] in der Ewigkeit und nie in der Zeit sich ereignen kann“.⁶² Hier stellt sich die Frage, ob Gottes Handeln einen spürbaren Unterschied macht für uns, wenn es nicht in unsere Erfahrung eingehen kann.

Barth verwendet das Bild des aufgewirbelten Staubs als Zeichen des Sichtbar-Machens der marschierenden Kolonne und spricht vom „Einschlagtrichter“, an dem erkennbar ist, „daß hier eine Granate explodierte“ bzw. von der „Höhle im Berg“ als dem „Ort im Berg, wo der Berg nicht mehr ist“.⁶³ Die ersten beiden Metaphern sind militärisch und bezeugen ein gewaltiges Ereignis durch die Spuren, die es hinterlässt. Die letzten beiden Bilder, die Barth evokiert, handeln von einem Hohlraum, der entstand durch das rein negative Nicht-mehr-Sein dessen, was dort zuvor gewesen ist. In diesem Fall geht es um Haltungen und Taten, die der Mensch überwunden hat, so dass „neue Positivitäten entstehen,

⁵⁹ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 20.

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 19.

⁶¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 456.

⁶² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 458.

⁶³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 458.

neue Standpunkte, neue Rechthabereien“, welche sich aber durchaus noch „in die Gestalt dieser Welt“⁶⁴ fügen, sofern es der „Mensch allein ist“,⁶⁵ der sich hier betätigt. Barth kritisiert hier „*prometheische* Möglichkeiten“, durch die der Mensch sich selbst erhöht, doch gesteht er zu, dass es auch Handlungen gibt, aus denen nicht der Mensch, sondern „Gottes Eigenart, Eigenwille, Eigenmacht, Eigenrecht“⁶⁶ leuchtet. Dieses Leuchten störe, weil es ein Angriff sei auf den Menschen in dieser Welt.

Barth fragt, was wir dafür tun können, dass in unseren Handlungen „die Überwindung des Menschen und darum die Herrlichkeit Gottes leuchtet“,⁶⁷ und antwortet: Wir sollen Ja sagen zur Problematik unseres Daseins. Im Anschluss an die paulinischen Ermahnungen ruft Barth zur Buße auf und damit zur Erneuerung unseres Denkens, um Einsicht zu bekommen in das, was der Wille Gottes ist: „Buße heißt *Um-Denken*“.⁶⁸ Dies ist für Barth die primäre ethische Handlung. Dass „Gott in uns denke“, ist in Barths Augen eine „Illusion romantischer Philosophen“.⁶⁹ Den Gedanken der Ewigkeit denken wir dann, wenn wir „in der *Frage*“ nach dem Sinn unseres zeitlichen Daseins dessen letzten Sinn erkennen.⁷⁰ Wir sollen die Sinnfrage festhalten, *auch wenn* oder *gerade weil* sie uns selbst, unser eigenes Denken und Tun in Frage stellt.

In Anspielung auf ein Pauluswort, in welchem die Arbeit des Gewissens beschrieben wird, empfiehlt Barth, wir sollen der Krisis unserer „sich untereinander anklagenden oder auch entschuldigenden Gedanken“ (Röm 2,15) nicht ausweichen, sondern „dem *Worte* Gottes Gehör“ und „dem *Werke* Gottes Raum“ geben, und das genüge: „Die Gnade genügt, auch für die Ethik!“⁷¹ Hier ist Barth ganz nah an einer reformatorischen Grundeinsicht, die von Luther und Kierkegaard in vielerlei Variationen repetiert wurde. Keineswegs wird eine ‚billige Gnade‘ ohne Werke vertreten, doch kann sich niemand durch seine Werke Gottes Gnade sichern. Barth wettert gegen die *securitas* des Menschen, der sich seiner Sache allzu sicher fühlt. Die Gnade genüge, „den Menschen in seiner verfluchten Sicherheit zu erschüttern und seiner seligen Bestimmung durch den neuen Menschen in Christus zuzuführen“.⁷² Die Polemik gegen die *securitas* kommt der Glaubensge-

64 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 458–59.

65 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 459.

66 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 459.

67 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 460.

68 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 460.

69 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 460.

70 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 460.

71 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 461.

72 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 461.

wissheit, der *certitudo* zugute.⁷³ Barth weist uns an den Ort, wo unser Glaube gestärkt werden kann: dort, wo wir das Wort Gottes hören und aus ihm eine Wegleitung für unser Tun bekommen. So unterstreicht er, dass „das *letzte* Wort der hier notwendigen *Belehrung* von Gott selbst, von Gott allein gesprochen wird. *Er* ist die große Störung der Dogmatiker *und* der Ethiker“.⁷⁴

In Röm 12,16–20 zählt Paulus die Handlungen auf, die sich mit einem christlichen Wollen und Tun nicht vertragen. Beispielsweise fordert er die Römer auf, keinem Böses mit Bösem zu vergelten. Barth kommentiert, das christliche Ethos sei „Reinigung des Handelns von allen biologischen, pathetischen, erotischen Elementen, der schlechthinnige Protest gegen jede von *Menschen* eingenommene Höhenstellung“.⁷⁵ Auf ganz ähnliche Weise wendet sich Kierkegaard gegen die Auffassung, die christliche Liebe sei „jenes versteckte, heimliche, rätselhaftes Gefühl hinter dem Gitter des Unerklärlichen, das der Dichter ans Fenster locken will“; sie sei „nicht eine Stimmung in der Seele“, sondern „lauter Handeln“.⁷⁶ Kierkegaard reduziert hier die affektiven oder emotionalen Elemente der Liebe (oder passender: der Vorliebe) zugunsten von einer Praxis der Nächstenliebe, welche alle Mitmenschen umfasst, ob man diese mag oder nicht.

Barths Interpretation von Röm 12,21–13,7, wonach jeder sich den jeweils regierenden Obrigkeiten unterziehen soll, läuft darauf hinaus, dass wir die Ordnungen der bestehenden Welt deshalb nicht zerbrechen sollen, weil Jesus das Bestehende schon *besiegt hat* und weil es keine energischere Unterhöhnung des Bestehenden gebe als das illusionslose Geltenlassen von Staat, Kirche, Gesellschaft, Recht, Familie, Wissenschaft, etc.⁷⁷ Die *wahre* Revolution komme von Gott.⁷⁸ Barth gibt Rechenschaft von ihr in seiner Auslegung von Röm 13,8–14 unter der Überschrift „Die große positive Möglichkeit“.⁷⁹ Hier finden wir drei paulinische Kernsätze, die sowohl von Barth als auch Kierkegaard „in drei Reden in Der Liebe Tun“ ausgelegt wurden:

73 Barth schreibt vom Christentum, es sei „immer *certitudo* dem Menschen verleihend, aber, zur Ehre Gottes und uns zum Trotz, nie *securitas*, [...] und nie ein Ausruhen erlaubend“, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 489.

74 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 462.

75 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 491.

76 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 110. Vgl. Claudia Welz, „How to Comprehend Incomprehensible Love? Kierkegaard Research and Philosophy of Emotion“, *Kierkegaardiana* 24 (2007): 261–86.

77 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 506 und 509.

78 Vgl. Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 511. Vgl. Kierkegaard, SKS 9, 138, wonach das Wunderwerk des Christentums darin besteht, durch das Gottesverhältnis Himmel und Erde so still zu bewegen, dass niemand es bemerkt.

79 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 518.

1. „Bleibt niemanden etwas schuldig – ausgenommen die gegenseitige Liebe!“
2. „Du sollst deinen Nächsten lieben als dich selbst!“
3. „So ist nun die Liebe des Gesetzes Erfüllung.“⁸⁰

Die „große positive Möglichkeit“ ist für Barth nichts anderes als die Liebe, verstanden nicht als einzelne Akte, sondern als eine ethische „*Gesamthaltung*“.⁸¹ Die Liebe versteht Barth nicht primär als ein menschliches Tun, sondern in Verlängerung von Röm 5,5 als „Ausgießung“ des göttlichen Geistes⁸² und damit als „*Gottesmöglichkeit*“ und insofern „*des Gesetzes Erfüllung*“.⁸³ Auch Kierkegaard bestimmt die christliche Liebe als „Geistesliebe“.⁸⁴ Wie Gottes Geist allgegenwärtig und *semper actuosus* ist, so wolle das Christentum „überall wirken“; man müsse „von Gott ausgehen“, „um in Liebe den Nächsten zu finden“ und umgekehrt „in der Liebe zum Nächsten Gott“ zu finden.⁸⁵ Dementsprechend zitiert Barth Kierkegaard, für den die Liebe das „Geistesverhältnis“ zum Nächsten sei.⁸⁶

Allerdings will Barth nicht, dass unser Gottesverständnis ein „Verständnis auf Abstand“ sei, was er Kierkegaard zuschreibt.⁸⁷ Stattdessen möchte er den unbekannt Gott „erkennen und lieben in der Unbekanntheit des ‚Nächsten‘“, in der „Andersheit des *Andern*“ und „in *ihm* [dem andern Menschen] die Stimme des *Einen* [d.h. Gottes] hören“.⁸⁸ Nächstenliebe ist laut Barth „das durch die Erkenntnis Gottes in Christus begründete (und darum gebrochene!) Verhältnis zum Mitmenschen, das Verhältnis, in dem nicht Mensch dem Menschen, sondern Gott Gott gegenübersteht“.⁸⁹ Diese Barth'schen Formulierungen vermitteln den Eindruck, als sei die zwischenmenschliche Liebe in Wirklichkeit ein innergöttliches Verhältnis. Kierkegaard dagegen sieht den Menschen „vor Gott“⁹⁰ und damit als von ein von Gott getrenntes Wesen. Gott ist in der Liebe zum Nächsten die „Zwischenbestimmung“ (Dän.: *Mellembestemmelse*),⁹¹ d.h. Gott tritt *zwischen* den einen und den anderen Menschen als das personifizierte Band der Liebe, das

⁸⁰ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 518.

⁸¹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 519.

⁸² Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 519.

⁸³ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 520. Vgl. hierzu Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, Rede III A, 102–49.

⁸⁴ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 159.

⁸⁵ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 155.

⁸⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 521.

⁸⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 520.

⁸⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 520.

⁸⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 521.

⁹⁰ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 69.

⁹¹ Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 66.

uns untereinander verbindet. Daher sollen wir „Gott höher als alles“ lieben, denn dann lieben wir „auch den Nächsten und im Nächsten jeden Menschen.“⁹²

Barth fasst die Liebe als „Entdeckung des Einen im Andern“, die in jedem Nächsten „nur das *Gleichnis* des zu Liebenden“ sehe: „sie sieht und hört in jedem *zeitlichen* Du das gegenüberstehende *ewige* Du, ohne das es kein Ich gibt“.⁹³ Dieser Satz mutet dialogphilosophisch an und erinnert an den dritten Teil von Martin Bubers *Ich und Du*. Hingegen ist Barths Abwehr der „Vorliebe“ für einen Menschen, der allen anderen vorgezogen wird, und seine Hervorhebung der Liebe als „*Pflicht*“ des neuen Menschen⁹⁴ ganz im Takt mit Kierkegaards Agenda, wendet Kierkegaard sich doch ebenfalls gegen das, was er *Forkjerlighed* (Vorliebe) nennt: die Präferenz des einen, geliebten Menschen auf Kosten aller anderen, und streicht stattdessen die Pflicht der universalen Nächstenliebe heraus.⁹⁵

Das Tun der Liebe ist laut Barth das Tun des Guten gerade darin, dass die Liebe nicht „an jenem Kreislauf vom Bösen zum Bösen“ beteiligt ist: „Sie ist der radikale Umsturz alles Gegebenen, weil sie die radikale Anerkennung des Voraus-Gegebenen in allem Gegebenen ist“.⁹⁶ So Barth im Originalton. Das „Leben und Walten der Liebe“ (hier zitiert Barth wieder Kierkegaard) werde Ereignis im „Jetzt! der Offenbarung“, in der christologischen „*Wende* der Zeiten“ und damit im „Regreß von der Zeit auf die Ewigkeit“.⁹⁷ An dieser Stelle knirscht es gleichsam im Gebälk der Barth'schen Kierkegaard-Rezeption, waltet die Liebe dem Dänen zufolge doch gerade *in* der Zeit, aber so, dass wir das Zeitliche *sub specie aeternitatis* sehen und als solches segnen können. Die Ewigkeit ist uns nur zeitlich gegeben, etwa wenn wir uns hoffend ausstrecken nach der Zukunft, die auf Dänisch auch *det tilkommende* heißt: das auf uns Zukommende.

Während Barth die „große positive Möglichkeit“ der Liebe letztlich aus unseren Händen nimmt und Gott überlässt, sofern er die Transformation des Bestehenden in einem menschlichen ‚Nicht-Tun‘ verankert, das nur noch Platzhalter für die gigantische göttliche Revolution der alles-verändernden Liebe ist, versucht Kierkegaard, das Wirken Gottes auch *in* unserem bescheidenen Tun der Liebe zu

92 Kierkegaard, *Liebe*, Bd. 1, 66.

93 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 522.

94 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 522.

95 So in Rede IV. in der ersten Folge von *Der Liebe Tun*, welche von der Pflicht handelt, *alle* Menschen zu lieben, die wir sehen, d. h. nicht nur die attraktiven.

96 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 523.

97 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 524.

lokalisieren, ohne dass uns dieses Tun schon gänzlich von Christus abgenommen wäre.⁹⁸

5 Konklusion und Ausblick

Daher komme ich zur Schlussfolgerung, dass trotz aller *struktureller* Ähnlichkeiten in der methodologischen Grundlegung der Ethik erhebliche Unterschiede zwischen Kierkegaards und Barths Ethik der Liebe bestehen. Vielleicht hat sich Barth zu schnell von Kierkegaard losgelöst auf seinem Weg von der Dialektik zur Analogie als leitender Denkfigur.⁹⁹ Hier gilt es zu beachten, dass Kierkegaards Existenzdialektik zwar die menschliche Existenz als „Ort und damit als Verifikationshorizont göttlicher Offenbarung einschärft, damit aber nicht einer untheologischen Begründung des Glaubens das Wort reden will“.¹⁰⁰ Für Barth ist der Glaube kein Existential, sondern „eine Möglichkeit des Wortes Gottes“, das die Existenz von außen trifft.¹⁰¹ Während Barth Kierkegaards Auffassung teilt, dass die menschliche Existenz insofern dialektisch ist, als sie ihre eigene Unabgeschlossenheit auf sich nehmen muss, versagt der ‚Dogmatiker‘ Barth der ‚dialektischen Theologie‘ die Gefolgschaft, sofern er die Relation zwischen Gott und Mensch immer konsequenter vom undialektisch redenden Gott her interpretiert, so Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁰²

Ich würde dem gerne hinzufügen, dass Barth den menschlichen Rezeptionsbedingungen der göttlichen Offenbarung wenig – m. E. zu wenig – Beachtung schenkt. Liegt Gottes Offenbarung wirklich ‚oberhalb‘ der Existenzdialektik menschlichen Lebens, wird es fraglich, wie uns Gottes Wort überhaupt noch erreichen kann, es sei denn, das *Deus dixit* trifft auf ein ihm entsprechendes *homo audit*. Hört der Mensch nicht, wird es auch zweifelhaft, ob Gott gesprochen hat. Zugunsten von Barth kann jedoch der erste Band der *Kirchlichen Dogmatik* herangezogen werden, wo die (von einer „Vergottung“ scharf abgehobene) „Gottförmigkeit“ des Menschen, die *imago Dei*, nicht in ein bestimmtes *Sein*, sondern

⁹⁸ Siehe hierzu auch Barths Tambacher Vortrag „Der Christ in der Gesellschaft“ (25.09.1919), wo der Christ in der Gesellschaft keiner von uns, sondern Christus in uns ist (*Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, 34).

⁹⁹ Vgl. Eberhard Jüngel, „Von der Dialektik zur Analogie. Die Schule Kierkegaards und der Einspruch Petersons“, in *Barth-Studien* (Zürich, Köln, Gütersloh: Benziger, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1982), 127–79.

¹⁰⁰ Jüngel, „Analogie“, 171.

¹⁰¹ Jüngel, „Analogie“, 177.

¹⁰² Vgl. Jüngel, „Analogie“, 177–78.

ein *Tun* gelegt wird, nämlich in das Vernehmen und Verstehen des Wortes Gottes im Glauben.¹⁰³

Als Barth im März 1933 nach Dänemark eingeladen wurde, wo er zunächst in Kopenhagen und dann in Aarhus seinen Vortrag „Das erste Gebot als theologisches Axiom“¹⁰⁴ hielt, schrieb er auf der Fähre zwischen Seeland und Jütland einen Brief an Charlotte von Kirschbaum. In diesem Brief vom 11. 3. 1933 erwähnt er, er habe die „Barthianer“ – d. h. die Vertreter der 1926 von Kristoffer Olesen Larsen gegründeten dialektisch-theologischen Bewegung „Tidehverv“ (Zeitenwende)¹⁰⁵ – kennen gelernt und bemerkt abfällig: „aber das sind Fanatiker der Ironie (lauter kleine Kierkegaards!), die mir gar nicht gefielen und die mich ihrerseits des ‚Pietismus‘ verdächtigten!“¹⁰⁶ Mit dem Pietismus hatte Barth schon in den ersten beiden Ausgaben seines Römerbriefkommentars abgerechnet.¹⁰⁷ Kierkegaard dagegen wurde nie ganz fertig mit dem Pietismus als transnationale und transkonfessionelle Frömmigkeitsbewegung, und seine Bibliothek war gefüllt mit Erbauungsliteratur.¹⁰⁸

Wie Bruce L. McCormack überzeugend dargelegt hat, sind Veränderungen in Barths Theologie zwischen November 1918 und Oktober 1920 nicht vor allem den sozialpolitischen Ereignissen dieser Jahre, etwa der russischen Revolution, geschuldet, sondern vielmehr den Reaktionen auf die erste Ausgabe seines Römerbriefkommentars.¹⁰⁹ Barths Umarbeitung seiner Eschatologie in Auslegung von Röm 13 ist nicht zuletzt von Kierkegaard beeinflusst, sofern keine organische Verbindung oder Kontinuität mehr zwischen dieser unserer Welt und Gottes Reich angenommen wird.¹¹⁰ Soll es angesichts des ‚unendlichen qualitativen Unter-

103 Vgl. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1, 252–53.

104 Vgl. *Karl Barth – Charlotte von Kirschbaum. Briefwechsel*, Bd. 1, 1925–1935, hg. Rolf-Joachim Erler (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008), 254, Anm. 1.

105 Kristoffer Olesen Larsen (1899–1964) war Pfarrer an der Esajas-Kirche in Kopenhagen. Er repräsentiert eine radikal-existentialistische Kierkegaard-Deutung, vgl. Ders., *Sören Kierkegaard. Ausgewählte Aufsätze* (Gütersloh, 1973).

106 *Briefwechsel*, 257. Ich danke Niels Henrik Gregersen für den Hinweis auf diesen Brief Barths.

107 Vgl. Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten. Die Pietismuskritik des jungen Karl Barth und ihre Erwiderung* (München: Kaiser, 1978).

108 Vgl. Christopher B. Barnett, *Kierkegaard, Pietism and Holiness* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 5–6.

109 Vgl. Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 184–85, 202–04. Zur Neufassung des Römerbriefkommentars siehe auch Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (München: Beck, 2018), 133–62.

110 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 90: „Das Göttliche wächst organisch, so braucht es kein mechanisches Aufbauen mehr. Insofern eben steht die Offenbarung Gottes, die nun einge-

schieds¹¹¹ überhaupt eine Verbindung zwischen Himmel und Erde, Zeit und Ewigkeit geben, verdankt sie sich Gottes kenotischer Bewegung von oben nach unten.

Was Barth von Kierkegaard hätte lernen können, ist, dass die Alternative zwischen einer Schöpfungs- und Offenbarungstheologie dadurch unterlaufen werden kann, dass das ‚Natürliche‘ und das ‚Christliche‘ genau wie auch Eros und Agape ineinandergreifen. Bei Barth herrscht dagegen deren starre Entgegensetzung vor. Für ihn ist die christliche Liebe „nicht Eros, der immer begehrt, sie ist Agape, die nimmer aufhört“.¹¹² Dementsprechend ist die wahre, ewige Liebe auch keine menschliche Möglichkeit für Barth. Kierkegaard dagegen hatte einen Blick dafür, dass diese Liebe von Gott selbst ins Menschenherz hineingelegt wurde und dass auch Eheleute einander als Nächste lieben sollen.

Christus ist für Kierkegaard nicht nur ein vorbildhaftes Modell eines für uns leider unerreichbaren Handelns, sondern zeigt uns das, was wir sonst übersehen hätten: wie wir *in* unserem Tun die Liebe Gottes ‚geschehen lassen‘ können, indem wir *voraussetzen*, dass die Liebe auch im anderen Menschen schon ‚da‘ ist als eine uns allen gleichermaßen geschenkte Gottesgabe.¹¹³ Während nach Barth das menschliche Handeln lediglich auf das göttliche *hinweisen* soll, leitet Kierkegaard uns an, auch *im* menschlichen Tun der Liebe Gottes Wirken zu erkennen. Dies ist allerdings nur im Glauben möglich, denn ohne Glauben an Gottes Wirkkraft erschienen menschliche Liebestaten nur als rein menschliche Handlungen bzw. anonyme Lebensäußerungen. Barth und Kierkegaard sehen beide den Glauben als Erkenntnisgrund (*ratio cognoscendi*) der Liebe als Gottesgabe. Gilt ihnen der Glaube darüber hinaus auch als deren Seinsgrund (*ratio essendi*), oder ist es denkbar, dass die Fähigkeit zur Nächstenliebe auch unabhängig vom Gottesglauben gegeben ist? Sofern wir nur über das recht verstandene Gebot der Gottes- und Nächstenliebe unsere Nächsten ‚finden‘ und uns selbst als Nächste unserer Mitmenschen erweisen können, bleibt die Liebe an den Glauben gebunden. Während Kierkegaard Letzteren durchaus auch dem glaubenden Menschen als

treten ist, ‚außerhalb des Gesetzes‘, ist sie gegenüber den Kundgebungen, deren Träger die Idealisten sind, eine prinzipiell andere, neue Tat Gottes“.

111 Im Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage seines Römerbriefkommentars verweist Barth explizit auf den Einfluss Kierkegaards und dessen Rede vom ‚unendlichen qualitativen Unterschied‘: „Gott ist im Himmel und du auf Erden“, siehe Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, xx, vgl. xiv.

112 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 522. Vgl. damit Kierkegaards Rede III B in *Liebe*, Bd. 2 (Liebe als Sache des Gewissens).

113 Vgl. Rede „I. Liebe erbaut“ in *Liebe*, Bd. 2: „Gott, der Schöpfer, muß die Liebe in jedem Menschen einsenken, er, der selber Liebe ist. [...] *Der Liebende setzt voraus, daß die Liebe in des andern Menschen Herz zugegen ist, und unter dieser Voraussetzung eben erbaut er in ihm die Liebe – von Grund auf, sofern er ja liebend im Grunde voraussetzt*“, 241.

Mit-Wirkenden zuschreiben kann, ist der Glaube für Barth eine exklusiv göttliche Möglichkeit, von Gott allein in uns gewirkt.

Sowohl Barth als auch Kierkegaard geraten in den Verdacht, eine Sonderethik entwickelt zu haben, die nur dann gilt, wenn wir uns über die religiösen Voraussetzungen einig sind. Für Kierkegaard kann plausibel gemacht werden, dass dies nicht der Fall ist, sofern *Der Liebe Tun* „eine Ethik *durch* eine Ethikkritik“ ist „in Kraft von etwas, was *über* die ethische Forderung *hinaus* liegt“: „die Transzendenz, der neue Beginn“.¹¹⁴ Im Dänischen bedeutet *anden etik* sowohl die ‚zweite‘ als auch die ‚andere‘ Ethik. In Kierkegaards zweiter oder anderer Ethik wird die ethische Frage radikalisiert als kritische Frage, *wie* ich das, *was* ich tun soll, tun werde oder getan habe.¹¹⁵ Diese Ethik nimmt das Nicht-Meßbare zu ihrem Maßstab,¹¹⁶ was sich im Titel der letzten Rede der ersten Folge abzeichnet, der sich an Röm 13 anschließt: „Unsere Pflicht, in der Liebe Schuld gegeneinander zu bleiben“. Kierkegaard lässt die rein menschliche Liebe stranden – und zeigt dann eine Tiefendimension in ihr auf, welche uns unverfügbar bleibt: ihre Unermesslichkeit, aufgrund derer wir niemals miteinander quitt sein werden. Barths Auslegung des paulinischen Satzes „Bleibt niemandem etwas schuldig – ausgenommen die gegenseitige Liebe!“ ist zu kurz geraten. Doch leistet seine ‚jenseitige‘ Grundlegung der Ethik, in welcher er Gott allein die positiven Handlungsmöglichkeiten zuschreibt, eine heilsame Unterbrechung unserer menschlich-allzumenschlichen Tätigkeiten ‚aus der Höhe‘.¹¹⁷

Das Gleichnishaftes, wodurch bei Barth menschliches und göttliches Handeln aufeinander verweisen können, aber dennoch voneinander getrennt sind, ist bei Kierkegaard konzipiert als das Wirken Gottes *im* menschlichen Handeln und *durch* es, jedoch nicht generell und schon gar nicht in beliebigen Handlungen, sondern *nur dann, wenn* wir in der Tat unsere Nächsten lieben wie uns selbst. Gottes Wirken kann demnach nicht instrumentalisiert werden zur Legitimation politischer Programme oder gar zur Führung ‚heiliger‘ Kriege. Um über die bei Barth zuweilen noch vorherrschende Opposition ‚menschliches versus göttliches

114 Vgl. Grøn, „Ethik“, 364.

115 Grøn, „Ethik“, 364–65.

116 Vgl. Grøn, „Ethik“, 367.

117 In der *Kirchlichen Dogmatik* beschreibt Barth „a clearly defined space [...] within which meaningful human action can take place, as the Being in action of God calls forth a particular being in action of the ethical agent“, Paul Nimmo, *Being in Action: The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2007), 11. Im 7. Kapitel legt Nimmo dar „how human action conforms actualistically to the divine action“: „in faith, obedience, and prayer“, 14. Die Liebe ist, da sie nicht separat erwähnt wird, als eine Dimension des Glaubens, des Gehorsams und des Gebets zu denken.

Handeln' hinauszukommen, könnte man Kierkegaards Gedanke einer dynamischen „Zwischenbestimmung“ dergestalt weiterentwickeln, dass die Liebe nicht als „*Handlung* eines einzelnen“, sondern „*Ereignis* im Raum *zwischen* den einzelnen“¹¹⁸ verstanden wird.

Zudem sind die ethischen Implikationen von Barths aktualistischer Reformulierung der Christologie im Chalcedonense zu bedenken, wodurch eine *communicatio operationum* zwischen Gott und Mensch, d. h. ein Zusammenwirken von göttlicher und menschlicher Aktivität in Christus behauptet und das Verhältnis der zwei Naturen nicht als je schon vollbrachte Einheit, sondern als kontinuierliches Ereignis der Vereinigung bestimmt wird.¹¹⁹ McCormack schreibt dementsprechend: „Jesus Christ simply is the history of divine address and human response, of God corresponding (as human) to God (as divine)“.¹²⁰ Gott ist Gott für uns nur in dem, was er für uns *tut*, und in Christus wirken die beiden Naturen zusammen in einer Gleichzeitigkeit des göttlichen und menschlichen Tuns.¹²¹ Gottes Wesen liegt nicht ‚hinter‘ oder ‚über‘ seiner Aktivität, sondern ist ‚in‘ Gottes Wirken gegeben: in seiner Liebe zu uns.¹²² Sofern Gottes Wesen der schöpferische Grund aller anderen, geschöpflichen Handlungen ist,¹²³ könnte man im Zuge der Gottebenbildlichkeit des Menschen und der vom Menschen geforderten *imitatio Christi* argumentieren, dass Gott und Mensch gerade *im Tun der Liebe* zusammenwirken.¹²⁴

Barths Zugang zur Ethik ist bleibend aktuell, indem er uns mit offenen Fragen konfrontiert: „Wie können wir leben? Was sollen wir tun?“¹²⁵ Genau wie Kierkegaards ‚zweite‘ Ethik geht Barths Grundlegung der Ethik durch eine „*Kritik* alles Ethos“¹²⁶ und zwingt uns, die Ausrichtung unseres Tuns zu überdenken. Nicht nur

118 Lincoln, „Christliche Ethik als expressive Theorie humaner Praxis“, 14.

119 Bruce McCormack, „We have ‚actualized‘ the doctrine of the incarnation...: Musings on Karl Barth's Actualistic Theological Ontology“, *Journal of Dialectical Theology*, Heft 63, Jahrgang 32, Nummer 1, *Barths Römerbrief – damals und heute* (2016): 179–98, hier 192–93.

120 McCormack, „Musings“, 194.

121 Vgl. McCormack, „Musings“, 194–95.

122 Vgl. Paul Nimmo, *Barth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 58: „In the person and work of Jesus Christ [...], God makes Godself known to us as the One who loves. Correspondingly, then, the being of God can be described as the One who loves. [...] This divine love for us is of the very essence of God“.

123 Vgl. McCormack, „Musings“, 196 mit Verweis auf *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/2. Nach §64.2 ist Christi Menschlichkeit auch unsere, so dass nicht nur seine, sondern auch unsere menschliche Natur erhöht wird.

124 Vgl. die entsprechenden Kapitel in meiner Monographie *Humanity in God's Image: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

125 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 450.

126 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 451.

im Blick auf allzu selbstsichere, fanatische Formen der Religion ist der Barth'sche Hinweis auf „*Die große Störung*“¹²⁷ wertvoll, sondern auch im Blick auf die in einer säkularen Kultur gängige Gleichgültigkeit Gott gegenüber. So möchte man mit Barths *Römerbrief* in der Hand ausrufen: Wollten wir uns doch öfters von Gott stören lassen!¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 447.

¹²⁸ Was die Frage der *gratia irresistibilis* angeht, ist davon auszugehen, dass Gott keinen Zwang dem Menschen gegenüber ausübt; doch solange ihm kein autonomes Individuum, sondern ein in sich selbst verkrümmter Sünder gegenübersteht, kann keine Rede sein von einer freien menschlichen Entscheidung für oder gegen Gott. Der Mensch muss erst von sich selbst befreit werden, und dies kann z.B. so geschehen, dass Gott innere Widerstände beseitigt. Ich danke Bruce McCormack, der diese Möglichkeit in einem Gespräch am 5. Juni 2019 erwähnte.

Philip G. Ziegler

Ethics and the Catastrophe of Grace – Faith’s Obedience in the Ruins of Religion

Abstract: With its emphasis upon the humanly catastrophic consequences of the radical transcendence of God and of divine grace, the second edition of Karl Barth’s *Romans* should be deeply inhospitable to ethics and utterly unaccommodating of the concerns of moral theology. And yet, across his exegesis of chapters 6 and 12 in particular, Barth both elaborates a fulsome account of the presuppositions of a Christian ethic and outlines a vision of Christian moral action as sacrificial and parabolic witness at once ‘impossible’ and yet ‘actual’ in virtue of God’s justifying grace. In conversation at key junctures with Kierkegaard, this essay examines the fundamentals of Barth’s radical evangelical ethics as we meet it on the pages of his controversial commentary.

1 The Catastrophe of God as the Presupposition of Ethics

In her fine new intellectual biography of Karl Barth, Christiane Tietz summarises the fundamental achievement of the second edition of his *Römerbrief* in this way:

[...] Barth took the Reformation doctrine of justification, that the justification of human beings before God depends not on the human but alone upon God, to its extreme. He smashed all human self-assurance and all religious precepts that had been taken as obvious. His concern was that first of all one “endures in this situation.” Precisely this was faith.¹

The insight that Barth’s 1922 reading of *Romans* represents an “extreme” republication of the evangelical teaching of *iustificatio sola gratia* is of fundamental importance as we turn in this essay to consider the treatment of ethics in this work of the early Barth. Writing to his friend and theological co-conspirator, Eduard Thurneysen, during the period when he is undertaking the thoroughgoing revision of the commentary, Barth observes that “the turn from Osiander to

1 Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict*, trans. Victoria Barnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 130.

Luther is proving to be catastrophic compared to the first edition [...].”² A fresh encounter with Luther’s radical soteriology fuels the revision, a revision so thorough that Barth speaks of it with the same language he will adopt to describe the consequences of the advent of divine judgment and grace in Christ: *catastrophe*.

More important still is the fact that Barth’s extreme restatement of the reformational doctrine of justification elicited reactions closely analogous to those provoked by the teaching of the Luther of the 1520s. If in the case of Luther, critics like Erasmus saw in the gospel of justification by grace alone the abolition of the very conditions of possibility for human moral responsibility and striving, so too with the Barth of the second edition of the *Römerbrief*: from the earliest stages of its reception, Barth’s commentary was sharply criticised for allowing the hypertrophy of divine transcendence to obliterate any and all interest in human identity and agency.³ In a book filled with remarkable images, one of Barth’s particularly striking metaphors suggests just this when he says that “the activity of the community is related to the Gospel only in so far as it is no more than a crater formed by the explosion of a shell and seeks to be no more than a void in which the Gospel reveals itself.”⁴ So, why then is there any discussion of ethics in Barth’s *Römerbrief* at all and what possible form could it assume?

First and foremost, it is there because there is *paraenesis* in Paul’s letter and so commentary upon it must necessarily involve discussion of the Christian eth-

2 “Die Wendung von Osiander zu Luther macht sich gegenüber der ersten Auflage geltend wie eine Katastrophe [...]” Karl Barth letter to Eduard Thurneysen, 3rd of December 1920, in *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, Band I, 1913–1921 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 448.

3 For summary account of such criticism, see John Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth’s Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 11–19 and Archibald J. Spencer, *Clearing a Space for Human Action: Ethical Ontology in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2003), 13–32. Is it wrong to hear in Adolf von Harnack’s prominent public criticisms of Barth as a “despiser of scientific theology” an echo of Erasmus’s humanistic incredulity with Luther? See H. Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth–Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). For a recent restatement of the worry about the irrecoverable abolition of the “responsibility principal” by Luther’s soteriological doctrine, see Aku Visala and Olli-Pekka Vainio, “Erasmus versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62:3 (2020): 311–50.

4 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, ed. and trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 35. Throughout reference will also be made as necessary to the original German text of the most recent reprint of the 6th edition: Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015).

ical life.⁵ At another level it is there because Barth is crucially interested in thinking through the claim that “the problem of ethics is the problem of dogmatics.”⁶ The reality of God besets both discourses. This ensures that, as *theological* thinking, ethics is no less fraught with dialectical difficulty than dogmatics; it also ensures that as the conceptual rehearsal and expansion of the formula “God Himself, God alone,” dogmatics is inescapably self-involving and *existential*, ever concerned with “that unsearchable, divine relationship in which we stand.”⁷ As John Webster observes, for Barth “Christian dogmatics is inherently ethical dogmatics [...] precisely because its theme is the encounter of God and humanity.”⁸ Or, as Barth himself puts it, “if our thinking is not to be pseudo-thinking, we must think about life; for such thinking is a thinking about God” as the “depth and context and reality of life” and just so as its *Krisis*.⁹ No less than dogmatics, ethics has this *Krisis* as its decisive context: a context not only of ethical thought and deliberation but also supremely of ethical life.

It is well known that in the preface to the second edition, Barth quipped that his “system” in this work was “limited to recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity,” God and humanity.¹⁰ When we concentrate on the question of ethics, however, we find that Barth’s indebtedness to the Dane may in fact reach a little further still.¹¹ For Barth’s treatment of ethics in the commentary tracks closely Kierkegaard’s own developed distinction between what he styles first and “second ethics.”¹²

5 For an elegant defence of the claim that Barth’s text is in fact a commentary on Paul’s letter rather than “a hermeneutical manifesto, or a piece of irregular dogmatics [...] [or] an encoded set of sociopolitical experiences of directives,” see John Webster, “Karl Barth,” in *Reading Romans Through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth*, eds. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 205–23, 205.

6 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 424–25.

8 Webster, *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 8.

9 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 425.

10 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 10.

11 For extensive discussion of this relation with a concentration on Kierkegaard’s own developed ethics, see elsewhere in this volume, Claudia Welz, “Das Problem der Ethik in Karl Barths Römerbriefkommentar – im Vergleich mit Søren Kierkegaards Ethik der Liebe page (309-330).”

12 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, eds. and trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). For concise discussion see David R. Law, “Kierkegaard as Existentialist Dogmatician: Kierkegaard on Systematic Theology, Doctrine, and Dogmatics,” in *A Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Jon Stewart (London: Blackwell, 2015), 251–68, especially 261–4; and Philip L. Quinn, “Kierkegaard’s Christian Ethics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, eds. Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 349–75.

This distinction, set out in the early pages of the *Concept of Anxiety* (1844), envisages the need to conceive of a distinctive ethics – one “which belongs to a different order of things” – because it presupposes the actuality of sin: as Kierkegaard puts it, it reckons with the impossibility of the natural moral life of virtue. Indeed, the second ethics begins with acknowledgement of the absolute “*shipwreck*” of all ethics upon the rocks of our infinite qualitative distance from divine righteousness.¹³ Not humanity at its worst, but precisely humanity expressed in the highest of its achievements – for Kierkegaard, in the metaphysically rationalised pursuit of the moral ideality of right and duty and good – collapses and comes to ruin on the jagged rocks of unrighteousness before God.¹⁴ The presupposition of distinctively Christian ethics is sin, the brutal reality of human contradiction of God – and so also and more fundamentally – our contradiction by God’s judgment.

These ideas are a variant of the central argument advanced in his *Philosophical Fragments* published the same year (1844). There he argues that human beings are “not only outside the truth,” but exist “polemically against the truth” because the problem of knowledge is in fact identical to the problem of *sin*.¹⁵ As such it can only be resolved by the inbreaking of eternal Truth into the world of antagonistic untruth; and this has taken place in the paradoxical reality of the Saviour who “delivers” us into the truth in the moment of revelation that thought cannot think but to which faith can entrust itself. That moment is an event of eschatological *Krisis*: an event in which the sinner “becomes nothing and yet is not annihilated,” the “transition from ‘not to be’ to ‘to be,’” for which the human being owes the saving God “everything.”¹⁶ As these parallel arguments from *The Concept of Anxiety* and *Philosophical Fragments* show, Kierkegaard, before and in much the same way as Barth, conceives of the problem of Christian ethics strictly with reference to the singular crisis that befalls the fallen world of creaturely untruth in light of the advent in Christ of the God who is Truth.¹⁷ Any ethics pursued in the wake of *this* crisis can only be ventured as

13 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

14 Kierkegaard compared nature of sin in this case to a vortex, which ancient philosophers considered the ‘moving something’ behind all motion which “no science can grasp.” *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

15 Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 15.

16 Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 30–31.

17 It is interesting that Kierkegaard is quoted and invoked by name several times in the course of Barth’s exposition of Romans 12 and following.

a “new science” grounded in repentant faith’s “dogmatic consciousness of actuality.”¹⁸

Interestingly, Kierkegaard goes on to observe that “the second ethics presupposes dogmatics but completes it also in such way that here, as everywhere, the presupposition is brought out.”¹⁹ I want to suggest in this brief paper that Barth’s thinking about ethics in *Romans* shares this very same shape: it is pre-eminently interested in establishing the presupposition of Christian ethics – namely, divine grace acknowledged as the catastrophe of all ethics and religion – and then going on to construe Christian ethics and reflection upon ethical life precisely as the “bringing out” or “setting forth” of that presupposition. The presupposition of both the reality and the discourse of theological ethics is the reality of God’s righteous grace on which all comes to shipwreck, and that alone. This is why for the Barth of the *Romans* commentary, as we shall see, ethics is and can be nothing but sacrifice and parable: it is the modest service of a Christian life to attempt to “tell the truth” about its utterly transcendent ground, possibility, and reality, and this means relentlessly pointing away from itself to God and towards God’s grace.

While Barth’s discussion of ethics is concentrated naturally around the exposition of *Romans* chapters 12–15, its decisive basis is in fact found in *Romans* 6.²⁰ Barth discusses that chapter as a whole under the rubric of “grace,” treating first of the power of the resurrection (v. 1–11) and second of the power unto obedience (v. 12–23). Of course, all of this has as its own decisive basis what has come before, namely, the climax of *Romans* 5:20–21 which announces the superabundance of divine grace that overreaches the hideous abundance of sin. The truth that “before God no flesh is righteous” erupts into view when all the givens of human existence (including its religious and ethical possibilities) are “catastrophically dissolved” by divine judgment, when they are shown to provide no way from Adam to Christ.²¹ Precisely in this dissolution and catastrophe [*Aufhebung und Katastrophe*] Barth contends, “grace is grace”: only where everything

18 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

19 Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 23–24.

20 Alexander Massmann reminds us that Barth put it to Thurneysen that *Romans* 6 was “the axle around which the entire letter revolves,” in *Citizenship in Heaven and on Earth: Karl Barth’s Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 34, quoted from *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen Briefwechsel*, Band 1, 477. In addition to Massmann’s discussion of the ethics of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* in *Citizenship*, 1–57, there is concise and insightful discussion in David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth’s Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 3–31, and Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 274–80.

21 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 186; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 179.

in Adam is “offered up as a sacrifice” do we find ourselves in Christ “in virtue of what one is not.”²² As von Balthasar described it graphically, Barth contends that “God’s infinite holiness invades the medium of total sinfulness like a white-hot iron hissing in a pool of water” in an event in which “the abysmal sinfulness of creation is stripped bare, but this happens only because this abyss is shown to be a counterabyss: the precipitous heights of God’s adoption of us as his children.”²³

So, when Paul in Romans 6:4 speaks of Christ being raised from the dead by the Father “so that we might walk in newness of life,” he is concerned with the “display” and “vindication” of the “seriousness, the energy, and the radicality” of God’s saving negation and dissolution of our being in Adam.²⁴ As Barth explains, “because it is the *last* word spoken over *this* human being, it is at the same time for the new human being a hinge, threshold, bridge and *turning point*.”²⁵ The power of the resurrection – understood by Barth here as an eschatological and hence incomparable “non-historical happening [*das ‘unhistorische’ Ereignis*]” – “fills the void” brought about by the death of Adam in the death of Christ, at once rendering continuation in sin impossible while making “positive conformity” to Christ an “impossible possibility” for the new human being.²⁶ And this grace – now become the “unintuitable truth” of our lives – “cannot but press to concretion.”²⁷ Said differently, by its strictly asymmetrical contradiction of sin, grace works to “disrupt,” “revolutionise” and “overthrow” any accommodation, equilibrium or coexistence between the old and the new, precisely in order that faith may “stretch out towards” the sovereign reality of the new life in God.²⁸

It is only as those subjected to the power of the *futurum resurrectionis* that human beings even become capable of hearing the demand for obedience in service of God’s right. This is vitally important: the addressees of God’s claim and command are those who, in virtue of this power, “are what they are not,” and so those who in faith “dare to reckon [their] existence as the existence of

22 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 186.

23 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 82.

24 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 194, 190 (translations my own).

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 189 (translation my own).

26 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 195–97; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 200. As Barth explains, “sin is the (human!) possibility which the impossibility of grace has rendered impossible,” *The Epistle to the Romans*, 209.

27 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 222.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 201, 207.

the new human being.”²⁹ Thus, Barth’s second ethics can only be an ethics of this new and second ethical agent, as it were; an ethics for those who have come to themselves again precisely because they have lost themselves fully “in God and in God alone,” i.e., an ethics for those placed “*under grace*.”³⁰ Those to whom Paul later addresses his *paraenesis* are just these: human beings overwhelmed by “the breach and disturbance” of their lives and who are thus “bidden to think of themselves as existentially under grace, as belonging to God, and as brought within the sphere of resurrection” and so to venture obedience.³¹ For such as these, the mood of the divine Word now also becomes imperative: a “different being and having and doing” is demanded of them.³² The quality of this demand is strange indeed. Barth explains that it claims from its hearers “what cannot be expected of them,” namely “the dissolution and radically new ordering of here and now”; in fact, it is a Word that “demands that which it assumes.”³³ More specifically, it demands that the non-historical reality of the resurrection become a “clear and directly intelligible event in our very own bodies” even now (Romans 6:14).³⁴

In this way, God’s revelation simultaneously opens and exposes the “great gulf” that separates grace, life, and holiness from sin, death, and all that is unholy; our encounter with this revelation presses us to acknowledge this gulf in life and in thought; it drives us to “attempt to draw up a system of ethics” by which to resist the “vitality of [our] morality” and to direct our new life.³⁵ But the all-too human knowledge involved in these efforts is itself always dissolved [*aufgehoben*] by its own divine origin and content, rendering the attempt impossible. It is amidst the ruins of the paradoxical failure of this highest religio-ethical endeavour of ours – *you must! you cannot!* – that Barth’s “second ethics”

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 211 (translation altered).

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 213. There is an important parallel here between Barth’s view of the emergence of this new and second ethical agent as a feature of Paul’s witness in Romans, and J. Louis Martyn’s claim that in Galatians, Paul’s *paraenesis* similarly presupposes a radically new ethical agent, see “Epilogue: An Essay in Pauline Metaethics,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, eds. John M.G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 173–83.

31 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 218–19; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 219.

32 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 222.

33 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 224.

34 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 224.

35 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 227–28.

arises on the only ground available: that of grace alone.³⁶ As he concludes, “That we conceive and grasp the possibility of that which is impossible” – namely, the work of ethics *coram deo* – “as our own proper task: that is the power of the *obedience* in which we *stand* because it is the power of the *resurrection*.”³⁷

2 The Great Disruption – *Die große Störung*

Now, it is in commenting on Romans chapters 12–15 that Barth sets out the actual contours of a second ethics consequent upon the “shattering disturbance of the gospel of Christ.”³⁸ For present purposes, these can be quickly sketched. The primary form of ethical action is *sacrifice*, understood as that surrender and renunciation of all our living and doing ingredient in the recognition of God’s deity, mercy and freedom; Barth says it is to make an “unconditional gift” of our entire concrete existence *solī deo gloria*.³⁹ Sacrifice is the underlying form of each and every particular ethical action, a permanent posture in which we point, as it were, “to that which alone is worthy of being called ‘action,’ namely, the action of God.”⁴⁰ By this sacrificial posture – which Barth later styles as *repentance* and then also as the “*worship*” and “*love*” of God – we demonstrate and confess the permanent and primal origin of all ethical action in the unfathomable grace of God.⁴¹ The negation and self-effacement of this “sacrifice” is fundamentally a pointing away, a pointing back to grace as the sole presupposition of the moral life as such; it is a repeated life-act whose very *Gestalt* declares “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps 115:1).

All our subsequent “secondary” action is suspended, as it were, from this “single thread.”⁴² Our actions still share in the “form of this passing world” and so depend for their ethical quality upon our “being overcome” by its “coming transformation.” The deity of God and the infinite eschatological interval mean that no human actions are ever in and of themselves fully shaped by the coming transformation; to the extent that they point to and make that future

36 “In point of fact, it is grace alone that is competent to provide human beings with a truly ethical disturbance [...] and must be permitted to make that absolute assault upon human beings without which ethics are completely meaningless.” Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 430.

37 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 229 (translation mine).

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 225 (translation altered).

39 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

40 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

41 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 436, 452.

42 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 433.

visible, they serve as “parables” and “testimonies” [*Gleichnis und Zeugnis*] of God’s own action.⁴³ This they can do only in virtue of their partaking “in the power and dignity” of that origin.⁴⁴ All such acts assume one of two decisive aspects. The first Barth calls “positive,” by which he means human willing and doing that “protests against the great error” of the sinful world and which “negates” and “contradicts” its *schemata*: love [*agape*] is this “supreme, positive ethical possibility.”⁴⁵ Though this love of neighbours “in itself,” Barth says, is “trivial and temporal,” yet as a *parable* of God it is “of supreme importance: for it is both the emissary of the unknown God and the *occasion* for coming to know him”; indeed, acts of neighbour love are an “ostensive analogue” of the divine election of those who perform them.⁴⁶ Here, one might recall the way in which Kierkegaard for his part recommended “the work of love in recollecting one who is dead” as the purest enactment of agape, being as it must a matter of pure demonstration undertaken without calculated concerns for utility or consequence.⁴⁷ The parabolic power of this is, I would suggest, closely akin to what Barth has in view.

The second aspect of ethical action Barth calls “negative,” by which he means human willing and doing that is congruent with the transformation of this world under grace and is determinately related to this new and coming world.⁴⁸ Again, what is decisive here is that all such relative and provisional acts are “pregnant with parabolic significance, powerful in bearing witness, capable of concentrating attention upon the ‘Beyond’.”⁴⁹ Human acts which, because they take their direction and shape from the new, refuse and interrupt and break open the continuities of the old aeon of sin – Barth develops the example of the love of enemies in this section – tell of their “primal origin” in the great disturbance of the grace of God.

43 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 458.

44 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 444.

45 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 451.

46 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 476 (translation mine).

47 Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. and trans. Howard. V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 345–58. “The work of love in recollecting one who is dead is thus a work of the most unselfish, the freest, the most faithful love.” (358).

48 “When we reflect that the new world can be none other than the old world dissolved and overthrown by the victory of Christ [*die in Christus siegreich aufgehobene und umgekehrte alte Welt*], it becomes clear that, when the invisible operation of the old world becomes visible in dissolution and overthrow, we are in fact confronted with the operation of the new world.” Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 166; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 156.

49 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 461.

Barth suggests that precisely because all such acts are never anything more than relative parables, demonstrations, and testimonies, they call into question the conceit of every absolute ethics: such an ethics of grace is first and foremost “the final protest against every high place human beings can occupy” and “the axe laid at the root of *our own haphazard conceits*.”⁵⁰ We note again that Barth’s interest is that these acts *tell*: they tell of their origin in the coming world, they tell of their own impossibility and relativity, and, most importantly, they tell of the God whose action is and will establish the right and the true. Here again Kierkegaard presents a parallel instance in what Sylvia Walsh has styled his “inverted dialectic” of the Christian life in which the “essentially Christian” thing is best attested by the negative qualities of faith’s existence, including “dying to the world” and “self-denial.”⁵¹ As Thurneysen rightly discerned, this view of moral action incited by the forceful assertion of divine grace, “means – *with* Luther and Dostoyevsky and *against* Franciscanism and Tolstoy – seeing the *regnum Christi* in the midst of his enemies [...]” among whom we ourselves are ever in some important sense yet to be counted.⁵²

3 Some Commentary and Conclusions

As Barth himself emphasises in the preface to the second edition of his commentary, the work is but a “prolegomena” and “no more than a prolegomena,” and this is certainly true also of the treatment of ethics.⁵³ Barth does not elaborate an ethics here; rather he merely lays out the coordinates and orientations within which that task might be undertaken. Yet, perhaps prolegomena is all that is ever really possible for such an ethics of grace. As Barth writes, “God is God: this is the presupposition of ethics. Ethical propositions are only ethical as expositions of this presupposition, which may never be regarded as a thing already known, or treated as a basis of future routine operations, or as something from which it is possible to hurry on to a new position.”⁵⁴ The upshot of this re-

⁵⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 467, 466.

⁵¹ See Sylvia Walsh, *Living Christianly: Kierkegaard’s Dialectic of Christian Existence* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2005), 9.

⁵² Eduard Thurneysen, “Das Römerbriefmanuskript habe ich gelesen.” *Eduard Thurneysens gesammelte Briefe und Kommentare aus der Entstehungszeit von Karl Barths Römerbrief II (1920–1921)*, ed. Katja Tolstaja (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2015), 192–93.

⁵³ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2–3.

⁵⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 439.

fusal of theological ethics to possess and dispose over its presupposition is that the essential quality of the moral life remains properly incalculable:

Since the true conformity to Jesus is no human quality or activity, it cannot be either compared or contrasted with these experiences or dispositions. It nowhere swims into the ken either of the historian or of the psychologist, and no [one] can claim to possess it directly. The life of ours which is positively conformed to Jesus is the life which is hid with Christ in God, and which is only 'ours' here and now as the eternal future.⁵⁵

Just as Kierkegaard's "second" and peculiarly Christian ethics emerged on the other side of our shipwreck on the actuality of sin – a reality that cannot be accessed or comprehended "with metaphysical light-mindedness or with psychological concupiscence"⁵⁶ – so too Barth's second Pauline ethics emerges out the catastrophic event of grace which resists natural comprehension by historian and psychologist alike. The reason it does so is that – for Barth, as for the Dane – Christian ethics is fundamentally determined by acknowledgment of the "concrete eschatological context to which our lives own their reality," as Ingolf Dalferth has put it.⁵⁷ Barth's treatment of ethics in the *Römerbrief* looks to call to mind that "Christian theology proceeds upon the quite different premise that we ourselves have been contextualized; and not just conceptually, but actually."⁵⁸ This theological labour is Barth's preoccupation here: contextualising ethics in the "strange new" world announced in the gospel of God Paul preaches.

Within the eschatological context Barth describes, "second" ethical life is a strictly unnatural performance of an existence whose love and service is transparent to its true and only source, namely the grace of God, telling by its forms and commitments, actions and postures ever so many parables of the reign of the God who is God. To adapt a phrase of Barth's own, grace is not a predicate of life, but life can and will be a predicate of grace. The task of ethics is pre-eminently indicative in this register, as moral actions point and display the truth about the judgment and grace and love of God in and over human affairs. Barth's dialectical ethics is an "ethics of witness" because it is properly preoccupied with God, God's doing, and the claim of that doing upon women and men.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 197.

⁵⁶ Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 20.

⁵⁷ Ingolf U. Dalferth, "Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. S.W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27.

⁵⁸ Walter Lowe, "Prospects for a Postmodern Christian Theology: Apocalyptic without Reserve," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 23.

⁵⁹ See McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 275–76, who cites Ruschke, *Entstehung und Ausführung der Diastaseologie*, 81 in support of this claim. Paul

In Barth's own words, by paying attention and acknowledging the Word of God as our decisive eschatological horizon and environment, all our ethical thinking and doing is incited to "make room for the work of God" in a posture of joyfully astonished repentance.⁶⁰

Conceived in this way, the specifically *ethical* quality of our actions is their capacity, by grace, sacrificially to witness to the great disruption and coming transformation of the world that occurs when God in his eternity crosses our time. As both our primal origin and ultimate destiny, God's righteous grace is and remains "Infinitely qualitatively different" than the world and the lives it interrupts and redeems, paradoxically real and effective precisely in its refusal to be assimilated or naturalised. It is for this reason that, just like the human agents who perform them, particular ethical actions are and remain 'what they are not': when faith confesses that by grace we "are what we are not," it also acknowledges that by grace we "do that which we cannot," namely, parabolic acts that truly correspond to our gracious election and the coming Kingdom. As we noted at the outset, what is involved here for Barth is the logic of imputation set in an eschatological key: human moral actions that tell the truth about God, God's own action, and God's purposes in acting, simply do not possess the truth of which they tell. If nevertheless they do speak truly of the God who is God – and Barth thinks they can and will do so – then this is an "impossible possibility," properly a miracle, like the miracle of faith itself. This is why all such actions must be "sacrificed" even as they are performed: for moral life *under grace* simply is and can only be an unending "*Non nobis Domine...*".

There is, I think, an abiding lesson to be learned from Barth's discussion of ethics in the second edition of the *Römerbrief*: whatever account we might give of theological ethics, the Christian moral life is uniquely burdened with the need to be utterly transparent to the outworking of the world-dissolving and remaking grace of God that is its only possibility and promise. The distinctive eschatological register of Barth's commentary – and here perhaps the genre of biblical *com-*

L. Lehmann's later programme in theological ethics makes this theme – i.e., the essentially parabolic character of Christian moral action – its centre piece, see *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). I re-formulate this idea afresh in relation to impulses drawn – once again! – from recent work in Pauline exegesis, see Philip G. Ziegler, "Parabolic Life – Toward an Ethics of God's Apocalypse," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34:4 (2021), forthcoming. ⁶⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 437. On this, see Michael Weinrich, "Karl Barths Weg von Krisis zur Kritik: Klärung der Perspektive – kein Richtungswechsel," *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 32:1 (2016): 71–94, 93.

mentary itself becomes supremely meaningful⁶¹ – affords him an arresting idiom in which to republish the radical truth that human actions, no less than human beings themselves, are justified by grace alone, that their quality *as ethical acts* is extrinsically imputed to them graciously, or not at all. Barth's second ethics is ambitious to be an ethics of *eschatological* grace, which is to say an ethics that never betrays or belies or fails to announce that it exists miraculously amidst the ruins of Adamic existence, being itself the impossible possibility of the catastrophe of divine grace, and ever pressing to enact all-too-human parables of the Kingdom of God. As sacrifice and parable, it looks to “set forth” and “bring out” its dogmatic presupposition, namely, that “Grace suffices, even for ethics.”⁶²

61 “The new world of the Bible, about which Barth wrote with such astonishment in *Romans*, is the new world of *God*; exegesis cannot capture that reality, and it can never be transformed into a mere textual *positum* [...] biblical commentary is to be one of the places in which the church's theology registers the fact that its life is always open to devastation and renewal by the Word of God. From that devastation and renewal there can be no deliverance, not even a scriptural one.” Webster, “Karl Barth,” 223.

62 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 437. “Die Gnade genügt, auch für die Ethik,” *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 461.

Amy Marga

Reading Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* 1919 for a Postcolonial Era of Theology

Abstract: This essay explores the postcolonial impulses in Karl Barth's *Romans 1919* commentary. It lifts up his rejection of hermeneutical norms and explores his critique of European historical optimism and its imperial ambitions. What comes through is Barth's nascent theology of the freedom of God. Although he was a Eurocentric thinker writing decades before colonies across the globe gained their independence from European powers, Barth displays a sensibility to postcolonial interests such as anti-imperialism, the legitimacy of "other" voices about God, and the hope for a future Christian faith based on culturally hybrid views of God's work in the world. *Romans 1919* can act as an artifact of a proto-postcolonial attempt by Christian theology to disentangle itself from imperial politics and empire-building.

1 A Postcolonial, Post-Imperial Era of Christian Theology

It is an undisputed fact that Karl Barth was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, if not the greatest. The century saw upheavals in world history, including the European tragedies of World War I and World War II. It also saw the breaking up of European imperial rule across the globe, with Britain leaving India in 1947 then Palestine in 1948. Egypt gained its freedom in 1956, and several African colonies followed suit in the 1950s and 1960s. The historical wave of decolonization in the twentieth century has given rise to the current field of study in postcolonial thought, literature, politics, sociology, and more.¹ It has even prompted Western theology to begin asking itself what kind of role it should play in a postcolonial world of global Christian communities.

1 Seminal works in postcolonial thought include Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963); Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 66–111. For good introductions to postcolonial thought and theory, see for example, Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 2001); Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Karl Barth's theological career spanned the decades before the forces of decolonization started reconfiguring global geopolitical realities. His theological outlook was unapologetically Eurocentric and male-centric as was typical for his day and age. His theology addressed a Christian Church that did not yet perceive the global movement of peoples who were agitating for independence from European colonizers. A year before his own seminal work, *Der Römerbrief*, was published in 1919 (cited hereafter as *Romans 1919*), there were upwards of twenty conflicts between colonies and colonizing powers such as Britain and France, but these conflicts were seen as narrow political and economic skirmishes rather than the beginning of a global groundswell of struggles for independence. Further, as a citizen of Switzerland which held no overseas colonies, Barth did not occupy a front row seat to the geopolitical turbulence of his time. However, as this essay will show, Barth's critiques of European imperialism and his growing commitment to God's freedom in the *Romans 1919* commentary stretched his theology into proto-postcolonial and anti-imperial views that are instructive for Christian thinking in the twenty-first century.

Since the 1990s, the study of postcolonial theology has engaged with other political and contextual, liberative theologies.² Postcolonial studies, with its focus on the impact that European imperialism and colonialism has had on countries across the globe, has also prompted Western Christianity to interrogate itself on just how tightly connected it has been to European imperial and colonial ambitions. The short answer to this question is: very tightly. Historically, Christianity has been the handmaid to European ambitions, both in the global south as well as in the settling and colonizing of North America. In the emerging field of postcolonial scholarship, three priorities come into focus for the purposes of this essay. First is the study of how indigenous peoples and their lands have been devastated and decimated by European colonizers. Second is the investigation of how communities have become racialized or "othered" by European anthropological paradigms and racial theories. Third is the exploration of the cultural hybridities that may result from the colonial encounter.

Postcolonial thought distinguishes between the actions of *colonizing* peoples on their lands and *imperial* ambitions of empire-building. The German politics in which Karl Barth engaged early in his career were focused less on colonizing lands and more on the imperial ambitions of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany. German efforts to colonize lands and peoples in African and Asian territories were short

² See for example, Stephen D. Moore, "Situating Spivak," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 15–30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x099k.5>.

lived compared to the long history and geographical reach of empires like that of Great Britain.³ But the Wilhelmine government was blatantly working to expand its political and economic powers in the world and trying to become a *Weltmacht*. It garnered all aspects of German culture, politics, and economics in its imperial agenda, specifically participating in the “othering” of people, rejecting any kind of cultural hybridity, and expanding its land. It pulled Christianity into its imperialistic orbit with the *Kriegstheologie* of many pastors and theologians who encouraged an imperialistic religious imagination in their parishioners.

2 Barth's Concerns with European Imperialism

In the case of early-twentieth Christianity in Germany and Switzerland, theologians like Barth were hardly conscious of how Europe's colonizing forces were affecting peoples and cultures around the world. They were still working very much so with the model of “Christendom” in their Christian activities such as missions. Sharing the gospel also meant “civilizing”⁴ and Barth had no qualms about using the typically colonialist language of “heathen” for non-Christian, non-European people.⁵ But in his work with the Swiss Socialists during his days as a pastor in Safenwil, Barth witnessed firsthand the crass economic and political imperialism of the Wilhelminan government in Germany.⁶ He also noted many decades later that he began writing the *Romans 1919* commentary in 1916, and he finished it in 1918, “right around the time of the second half

³ By most accounts, the German colonial empire lasted only about 30 years (1884–1918). After Germany lost the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles required it to give up its colonies overseas.

⁴ David Congdon, “Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission: Investigating the Origins of Karl Barth's Break With Liberalism,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol. 16, no. 4 (2014): 393–94.

⁵ “Evangelische Missionskunde,” in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes and Hinrich Stoevesandt in collaboration with Herbert Helms and Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, Gesamtausgabe III.2 (Zurich: Theologische Verlag Zurich, 1993), 60; Congdon, “Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission,” 395.

⁶ Alexander Honold, “Colonial Culture and Colonial Impacts on Culture in Germany,” in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures – Continental Europe and Its Empires*, ed. Rajeev Prem Poddar *et al.* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 215–16 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0b6vw.99>.

of the first World War [...].”⁷ In other words, Barth was keenly aware that the political ambitions of Germany and other European nations were leading to destruction and devastation. After railing for months against the Great War and the way that it represented God’s judgment against a hard-headed humanity in his weekly sermons in Safenwil, Barth returned to the Bible in order to find a counter-message of hope.

Karl Barth’s *Romans 1919* was a brave book. It was his very public attempt to relearn the fundamentals of theological thought, which he undertook by engaging Paul’s letter to the Romans. He gave credit for his new endeavor to his lifelong friend, Eduard Thurneysen, who planted into his ear the very basic questions of the Christian life: how pastors should preach, teach, and care for people. Instead of turning to how things had traditionally been done in the vein of Schleiermacher (who was a great preacher and pastor himself), Barth turned directly to the Bible for its word to *Barth himself*, in his own context. The “unlearning” of the conventional ways of reading Romans was surely a process. Barth noted that he had learned about and read the letter to the Romans already in his own confirmation days as a young lad. And so he tried to read the text anew, word for word, “as if” he had never encountered it before.⁸

The end result, a commentary on Romans that did not follow any of the hermeneutical norms of the day, was not at first a hit. In fact, it was rejected by three Swiss publishers. The tone, style, and theology were just so new. Barth had opened up doors to a method of biblical interpretation that establishment academic publishers were not quite ready to accept. Only once Barth’s friend, Rudolf Pestalozzi, financed the first exemplars of the book, did other publishers dare to pick it up and publish it. The insights that Barth drew out of the Bible, in particular his close reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans, can be seen as proto-postcolonial impulses. More specifically, Barth discovered a deeply anti-imperialist message that became the foundation for his doctrine of the freedom of God.

This essay will focus on three anti-imperialist, anti-colonial characteristics of Barth’s *Romans 1919* commentary. They are not fully developed theological viewpoints, nor do they explicitly address the global colonial realities of the time. But they point to a sensibility in Barth’s thought that would continue throughout his life. First, Barth made an interesting post-imperial move in his reading of Paul. Namely, he trusted Paul as a non-European interpreter of

7 Karl Barth, “Vorwort zum Nachdruck dieses Buches [1963],” in *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 6.

8 See Hermann Schmidt, “Vorwort des Herausgebers,” in *Der Römerbrief 1919*, ix–x.

God's activity across ages and cultures. In doing so, Barth rejected the "empathetic" hermeneutical tradition that was popular in his day. Secondly, Barth rejected the historical optimism of his day that accompanied so many European imperial agendas. Rejecting historical optimism formed Barth's critique of the History of Religions school, formed by thinkers like Ernst Troeltsch and Adolf von Harnack that were popular at the time. Finally, Barth started articulating a new commitment to the freedom of God. Barth began to see God as being equally near and far to *all* people, not just Europeans, and not even just Christians. He also discovered the power of the biblical language of a new humanity in Christ, suggesting that the future of Christian speaking is and should arise from cultural hybridity. These aspects of Barth's *Romans 1919* commentary make it curiously friendly to the postcolonial theories of twenty-first century Christian thought.

3 Barth's Break with the "Empathetic" Tradition of Biblical Interpretation

Although the rhetoric and imagery in Barth's *Romans* commentaries (1919 and 1922) have been seen as expressionistic and impressionistic, his books were not meant to be avant-garde art.⁹ The *Romans 1919* commentary in particular was meant to be a genuine attempt to allow the witness to the earliest forms of Christian theology as seen in Paul's letters to the Romans to be told in a new way to a new generation of readers (who were suffering from the traumas of war). In its impressions and rhetorical novelty, the *Romans 1919* commentary broke from standard hermeneutical rules and the widely accepted "empathetic" tradition of biblical interpretation.¹⁰ This is partly why thinkers like Gadamer have called it a "hermeneutical manifesto," and why reviewers of it, from Adolf von Harnack to Adolf Jülicher called it everything from "spiritualist" to "Marcionite."¹¹ The new method of approaching Paul and the Bible was not a welcomed development in academic theology at the time.

⁹ Timothy Gorrige, *Karl Barth Against Hegemony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24–26.

¹⁰ Richard Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 87.

¹¹ For a summary of reviews of *Romans 1919*, see Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 16–18.

Barth grew up in an era of biblical interpretation that required modern readers to *feel* their way into an author's psychology, culture, and intentions. The method of "empathetic interpretation" constructed a biographical and psychological profile of a biblical author based on an understanding of their historical context and how they may have functioned in their own contexts in order to then make judgements about the meaning, authority, and legitimacy of their written texts. As made famous by Friedrich Schleiermacher, this method explored a historical personality, such as that of Paul, and then tried to categorize him among other figures. It was a very modern way of thinking about the past and how the worldviews of thinkers in the past should impact contemporary thought. The empathetic tradition sought to recognize so-called religious heroes and towering figures. The empathetic tradition of biblical interpretation assumed that what Paul said about God would tell scholars more about Paul as a person and who he was. In other words, *Paul and his times* were the subject of biblical interpretation, not necessarily that to which Paul was pointing the reader. Barth himself followed this empathetic tradition in parts of his confirmation curriculum in 1910/1911, where he semi-psychoanalyzed thinkers from Plato to St Francis of Assisi.¹²

Barth had primarily followed the empathetic tradition of interpretation before 1915.¹³ The empathetic method of "feeling into" or "empathizing" with an author in order to unlock their psycho-emotional profile went back to the days of the Romantics, such as J.G. Herder (1744–1803). Herder believed that religion showed the human being at its best, and that the more humanity worked out its analogous relationship to God, the more it became formed into the *imago Dei*.¹⁴ Unfortunately, however, Herder also had a pseudo-scientific theory of race, whereby populations in southern countries with darker skin were partly excluded from this analogy. In Herder's philosophy, white Europeans were in the best position to turn into the *imago Dei*.¹⁵ It seems that in the empathetic tradition of reading texts, European thinkers saw mostly themselves.

12 See Karl Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, 71–125.

13 See for example Barth's "Lebensbilder aus der Geschichte der christlichen Religion" (1910/1911), in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, 71–125.

14 Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis*, 142; See also Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 205ss.

15 Herder must not be painted as a one-dimensional thinker. He made important contributions to European humanism and romanticism in the Enlightenment era when rationalism was being taken to an extreme. The point in mentioning the racist elements of his thought is that even some of the most humanitarian-minded European Christian thinkers operated with racist paradigms of humanity alongside their progressive Christian theologies.

Barth's reading of the apostle Paul as someone who was essentially unknowable and "other" to the modern German interpreter essentially called into question the either/or of the empathetic reading tradition where either a thinker thought and felt like Europeans or they were voiceless. In a draft of the Preface to *Romans* 1919, Barth notes how "strange" and somehow unknowable Paul's personality was (Draft III).¹⁶ Barth was not interested in Paul, or Paul's skin color, or even cultural context, as much as he was interested in what Paul was looking at. Paul was not a fellow sojourner in European outlook or history. And yet Barth trusted his "othered" voice because he was a fellow sojourner in faith. To Barth, the only thing we actually do know about Paul and Paul's personality is what he said about God. This is an important foundation to reading the *Romans* 1919 commentary with a postcolonial outlook. Barth did not look first to culture or personal feeling in order to make judgements about Paul's language for God. Barth's concern was that in which Paul put his faith.

Barth's reading strategy can be a model for postcolonial biblical interpretation. His hermeneutical decision to allow his gaze to follow Paul's pointing finger was a decision to trust the testimony of a person about that person's own experience of God, even though that person was basically an unknowable stranger in a far-away culture. Barth saw Paul primarily as a fellow sojourner in faith rather than a *historical figure* to be analyzed. In this way, Barth forged a common bond between himself and a stranger. Barth claimed that his reading strategy of the letter to the Romans was based in, as he said, the "School of the Holy Spirit." His trust in Paul and in the Holy Spirit's work in Paul opened up the Bible to be read by both colonizers and colonial subjects alike. Those people who live in formerly colonized lands do not necessarily need to follow the strict methodological steps of biblical exegesis or adhere to the European hermeneutical commitments to be trustworthy interpreters of the Bible. Barth democratized biblical interpretation by trusting Paul's words despite Paul's "otherness" to the modern European reader.

4 Barth's Critique of European Historical Optimism

A second proto-postcolonial impulse that is present in the *Romans* 1919 commentary is Barth's critique of German theology and European thought. In particular, he was deeply critical of the sunny view of history that pervaded German

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (Erste Fassung), 595.

theology.¹⁷ Christianity was mired in a philosophy of the progress of history which believed that each epoch in human history was *better than* and more advanced than earlier epochs. Based on Hegel and European successes, the German theological thought that was dominant in Barth's Switzerland was convinced that God blessed the Church and Christianity through successful worldly events such as global expansion, economic success, military might, and the rise of technology and science. World historical events held divine meaning and were vehicles of divine will and action. The White Man carried the so-called burden of civilizing dark-skinned people because he believed he had been enlightened by God. He believed that God bestowed upon him this divine and historical destiny. European culture was a special design of God to further human potential and creativity.

While it might be true that humanity has made progress in many areas of human life, such as in modern medicine, or in brain science on human attachment and bonding,¹⁸ it is difficult to argue that humanity is becoming a more peaceful and empathetic species, although some contemporary authors argue for just that.¹⁹ In the years of 1916–1918 when Barth was writing the *Romans 1919* commentary, the Great War was literally blowing the optimistic attitude towards history to pieces, at least in Barth's own view. But, whether he was fully aware of it or not, Barth was going up against some very powerful intellectual and cultural forces with his critique of Germany's historical optimism. He was going up against the History of Religions school (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) led by Ernst Troeltsch, and the highly popular historical views of Adolf von Harnack. Von Harnack was the most distinguished historian of Christianity in Germany at the time, and had been one of Barth's most beloved teachers. But he would not stay that way.

The History of Religions school, made famous by intellectuals like Ernst Troeltsch, worked within an optimistic framework of history's progress. To thinkers like Troeltsch, theology was only intellectually honest when it stayed within

17 Barth was influenced by the Swiss historian, Jacob Burckhardt, who had a very negative view of world history. Barth's reading of Burckhardt may also have led into his critique of historical optimism. See Michael Jimenez, "Power Corrupts: Karl Barth's Use of Jacob Burckhardt's Philosophy of History," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 21, nos. 1–2 (2014): 164–79.

18 See Daniel Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are* (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).

19 See Jeremy Rifkin, *Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2009). See also Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

the boundaries of what could be studied empirically. This confined theology to making comparisons among human religious phenomena and human religious expression rather than to any kind of divine reality. To Troeltsch and others in the History of Religions school, Christianity presented the highest, most developed form of human religion. Like many others, he promoted the “absolutizing” power of Christianity and its ethical system over other religious traditions. The so-called ethical power of Christianity happened to coincide closely to the power of the northern European, middle-class with its Prussian-oriented morality. Its morals and cultural assumptions were going to bring about a “Christian unity of civilization.”²⁰ Clearly, this totalizing vision was deeply colonial; it leveraged the power of the Christian faith to further European colonial ambitions.²¹

Next to the History of Religions school was the impeccable historical spade-work of Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). Von Harnack supported and promoted sciences of all types in German universities. He applied the best, most up-to-date, modern, and enlightened methods of historical research to his study of Christian history. He argued that the only way enlightened, modern people could understand the Christian faith was if theologians understood that church doctrines changed throughout history. This was a controversial claim in his day. But it proved to be a very powerful. For it gave biblical scholars and theologians – who were feeling ghettoized within the academy – the legitimacy to be in conversation with other endeavors in science and in the humanities. Harnack insisted that modern Christianity should avoid doctrines like Christ’s pre-existence, or a Logos philosophy. Harnack saw no need for “mystery” or a mysterious “otherness” of the Divine being for the Christian faith.²² But Harnack’s view of history was, like the other schools of thought, peppered with racist and anti-Semitic views and assumptions (included in his list of correspondents was the famed anti-Semite, Houston Stewart Chamberlain²³). Harnack adhered to a notion of the purity of *das Volk* – the German people.²⁴ He believed that it was the duty

20 Mark D. Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch and Liberal Theology: Religion and Cultural Synthesis in Wilhelmine Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 146.

21 Chapman, *Ernst Troeltsch*, 138.

22 Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf Von Harnack* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1951), 65–75 esp. 70–71; See also William Hugh Clifford Frend, “Church Historians of the Early Twentieth Century: Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930),” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 52, no. 1 (2001): 83–102.

23 See Wolfram Kinzig, “Harnack, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and the First World War,” *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2015): 190–230.

24 Kinzig, “Harnack, Houston Stewart Chamberlain,” 208–209, 223.

of the Church to cooperate with the State in creating a national culture within the framework of an empire.²⁵

In sum, the dominant strategies of historical criticism and biblical interpretation in Barth's day wove together a thick understanding of three imperial views, namely, the *imago Dei* reflected uniquely in light-skinned people; the identity of the Christian faith with Prussian ambitions; the understanding that Europe was divinely sanctioned to expand its cultural, economic, and political power. These theological commitments of the day were mired in racist anthropologies, commitments to the supremacy of light-skinned peoples, and ideals of progress and beauty²⁶ rooted in Europe's understanding of its own progress and modern identity. Intellectuals promoted a singular meta-narrative about the superiority of the European race over and above all other cultures, value systems and peoples.

It is not clear that Barth was fully conscious of the racial and colonial ambitions of Troeltsch's and Harnack's brands of liberal Protestantism. What is clear is that two manifestos that made their way into the public consciousness shook Barth's confidence in these methods and opened his eyes to the colonizing tendencies of the German theological imaginary. The first Manifesto was the 1914 *Aufruf an der Kulturwelt*, or the "Manifesto of the 94 Intellectuals," which has been cited in most Barth scholarship as the reason for his so-called break with liberalism. The second, lesser analyzed Manifesto was the "Call to Churchmen and Professors," also published in 1914. In his somewhat traumatized reaction to the "Manifesto of the 94 Intellectuals," Barth explicitly wrote in a letter²⁷ that all the things that the Swiss people had admired about Germany, its religion, science, art and culture, turned into a crass tirade against "Asiatic barbarism, English peddler spirit, French lies" and so forth. To Barth, the Manifesto signaled a "collapse of Christian ideals."²⁸ The interesting wording employed by Barth shows that he was just awakening to the colonial tendencies and prejudicial assumptions that were strong undercurrents of German Christianity. The colonizing tendencies and imperial ambition in the *Aufruf* that was undersigned by Christian signatories shocked Barth.

The second document that shattered Barth's confidence in European Christianity was the "Call to Churchmen and Professors," otherwise known as the

25 Regarding Ritschl, see William R. Ward, *Theology, Sociology, and Politics: German Social Conscience 1890–1933* (Bern, Francfort, Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1979), 34.

26 See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2011), 59–90.

27 Karl Barth to Wilhelm Spoendlin, January 4, 1915, in *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch, Gesamtausgabe V (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), 26–49.

28 Kinzig, "Harnack, Houston Stewart Chamberlain," 197.

“Manifesto of the 29.”²⁹ Like the *Aufruf*, it too circulated in the early months of the Great War. And it too was a document that combined national ambition with the Christian faith. The “Call” leveraged Lutheran theology and the political power of the Protestant church to further German imperial ambitions. Already in 1914, Barth had been preaching against Lutheranism’s push into other countries. He saw them doing it not for peace, but to expand Germany’s economic power.³⁰ Barth was critical of this document and saw it as yet another part of the failure of the liberal Protestantism of the time.

Barth rejected the self-promotion of the European colonial imagination in *Romans* 1919. He resisted the colonization of Christian theology by European values. He employed the language of “destiny-grabbing” to describe the idol of the European self. He argued in his discussion of Rom 1:18–21 that when people seek God, they end up finding “idols” or “themselves.” In finding both they risk “losing God.”³¹ He argued that the things that people are supposed to think about God, they think about themselves.³² Clearly, Barth was critiquing a colonializing move of making the light-skinned European “self” into the *imago Dei* to the exclusion of others. But instead of following Christian convention of the time and justifying this move with theology or the Bible, Barth condemned it as pure idolatry. He asserted that the god of the Self is the unreal God of “religion,” with which the true God of the Resurrection has lost patience.³³ He argued that where the European person sees himself as God, he is compelled to “fill the world that has become godless with idols.”³⁴ Moreover, our “fall” is not some kind of bite into a forbidden fruit, but a “fall” into the blindness of our own imagination and the emptiness of our own thinking.³⁵

Barth pushed hard against historical optimism in *Romans* 1919. He employed strong language with words such as idolatry, imprisonment, and impotence to describe history’s hold on the human imagination. Barth leaned upon the apos-

29 Barth had knowledge of an “Aufruf deutscher Kirchenmänner und Professoren” from 1914 and criticized its rhetoric of German uniqueness in world history and German ambitions to combine religion and state politics to expand German power. Barth preached a sermon in 1914 in which he mentions it. See Congdon, 399–406. See also Jochen Fähler, *Der Ausbruch des 1. Weltkrieges in Karl Barths Predigten 1913–1915* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1979), 55–66.

30 See Barth’s 1914 sermon from *Predigten* 1914, 519–20. Lutheranism does not necessarily bring the Gospel of *peace* to its African colonies, but does so to expand its political and economic *power*.

31 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 26.

32 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 27.

33 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 96.

34 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 27.

35 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 31.

tle Paul's own words to flip upside-down the notions of human culture and activity. Under Barth's pen, human ambition went from being fulfilling, creative, progressive, and enlightened to being empty, crisis-filled, homeless, powerless, and blind. Human cultural activities refused to follow a "divine rationality."³⁶ Instead, European culture developed a certainty about a "naturalistic religiosity that lifts up arbitrary, fantasy-based absolutizing and idolizing [acts] that can only end in the same kind of arbitrary nihilism."³⁷ When we place God next to what Barth called the "glories of state and culture, church and virtue," we get lost in a "fairy-tale like transformation of our relationship" to the true God.³⁸ We become victims of these cultural, human forces. As Barth noted, "the pulling down of God becomes its own punishment,"³⁹ and the propping up of a subjective image of God is the "betrayal" of the living God. We become prisoners of our own constructions. Barth wrote: "Mammon *becomes* the ruler of the world [...] 'the State *has* us' [...], culture *eats* us, and art, science and church *become* the goal and content of themselves."⁴⁰ We punish ourselves with the whole "shame" of world history⁴¹ that includes "capitalism, militarism, statism and all evil -isms."⁴² Indeed, one can add here the evil of "colonialism."

Barth also suggested that the European colonial imagination likes to put itself into the seat of the judge and then decide what is worthy in culture and history and what deserves to be destroyed. Postcolonial analysis of the European imagination uncovers that European modern thought believed that it captured the "real" of things, such as scientific knowledge, technology, exploration, etc. Non-European peoples were seen to be stuck in unreal, primitive, and ephemeral cultural expressions and mindsets. Barth condemned this mindset without naming it as such. He condemned the European mindset that *Europeans* are gods who have "personalities" to be glorified and who can re-make the map of the world, who can be fruitful and multiply in "empty" spaces of colonized lands, disregarding the peoples and cultures who were already there. It is interesting, then, that Barth uses words like "fantasy-based absolutizing"⁴³ and "fairy-tale-like"⁴⁴ to describe European historical optimism when those were the kinds of

36 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 33.

37 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 33.

38 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 34.

39 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 35.

40 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 35; italics are Barth's.

41 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 36.

42 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 36.

43 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 33.

44 Barth, *Der Römerbrief* 1919, 34.

words that Europeans would have used to describe cultures of southern lands and dark-skinned peoples.

Barth's critique of historical optimism can serve a postcolonial Christian project in the twenty-first century in that it uncovers the insidious ways in which countries such as Germany, France, and Britain leveraged Christian theology and doctrine for state power. Barth condemned the European colonial imagination which pretended that humans can draw near to God and that our highest values – of conquering, inhabiting lands, converting peoples, expanding European culture, and seeking out money – reflect God's will. The European cultural imagination and self-consciousness is no more real or permanent than any other cultural expression. It too gets caught up in its own delusions and Feuerbachian self-referentiality. Although Barth did not explicitly invite non-European voices in to his thoughts, he did open up some spaces at the table for those voices to enter.

5 The Viewpoint of God

So far, we have seen how Barth rejected the method of trying to form a psychological-emotional profile of the ancient apostle, Paul. He rejected the Troeltschian and Harnackian takes on theology which was confined to empirical measurement, Prussian cultural ideals, and which had no space for "mystery."

Next to these, Barth's third proto-postcolonial impulse in the *Romans 1919* commentary is through and through a theological one. By taking a stand with the apostle Paul and letting his eyes follow Paul's gaze onto God's divine self-revelation, Barth trusted Paul in the apostle's insistence that he had had an experience with a wholly Other reality, a divine reality. Barth's trust in Paul's witness to the reality of a divine Subject required Barth to have an "open take"⁴⁵ on the Bible. With the help of Paul and other authors who experienced something "outside" the confines of historical provability, Barth was able to experience this too. He believed we live in an open reality that allows for claims of a Being who transcends historical existence – but who does not reject it. This is the reason Barth found the Roman Catholics so intriguing in the early 1920s: they too, still held on to a commitment to an open reality that allows humanity to experience Something or Someone that cannot be mastered by historical, scientific, or even religious practices and methods of investigation. No doubt, Barth was criticized for this open take on the Bible. It went against a generation of

⁴⁵ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

thinkers trying to fit the narrative of the Bible into a deeply scientific and material paradigm of reality.

Barth's confidence that Paul was looking at and describing something *real* in his letter to the Romans can be seen in the way Barth describes the God-human relationship throughout *Romans 1919*. Barth insisted that humanity's relationship to God is essentially the *same* all over the globe. In his exegesis of Rom 2, Barth argued for God's nearness to all different peoples despite history and culture. This nearness of God is represented in the Nietzschean "transvaluation of values" – "*die Umwertung aller Werte*."⁴⁶ Barth wrote that despite our nearness or distance to God, whether we are heathen, irreligious, immoral, religious, Jewish, or moral, the "liberating call" of the Christian faith is "opening up a new history among the groups, circles, and peoples."⁴⁷ Barth claimed that God is not only the God of the Jews but also of the Gentiles. Barth asked: "How can it not come to light that God lays God's hand upon all humanity [*die ganze Menschheit*]?"⁴⁸

Not only is God equally near or far to all humanity, Barth furthered his argument that this divine Hand is a *creative* Hand that is calling for a *new people* who are in history but not subject to the vagaries of history. In particular, Barth's exegesis of Rom 2:28–29 points to God's desire to show God's justice and righteousness to all people, in Barth's words, both the "just and the unjust." Barth pulled humanity as a whole out from under the domination of history. He commented on verses 28–29:

The epochs of external [historical] stages and differences have run out. For the new people of God do not belong in this category, not in "history" [so-called] the way "history" and psychology want to describe it. This history has lost its objective nature [*gegenstandlos geworden*]. [The new people] belong in the history of "history" [*die Geschichte der Geschichte*], in which the criteria of God are applied: there is now people who "in hiddenness" (2:16), whether they be Jews, circumcised, doers of the Law and are therefore righteous before God, in the middle of the old, wrath-burdened world and as a beginning and breakthrough of a new people; a people of the promise and the fulfillment.⁴⁹

Barth continued this line of thought in his exegesis of the third chapter of *Romans* as well. He set out a case that the Christian faith is free from the European historical imagination. A new world – a new history – is breaking in through

⁴⁶ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 53.

⁴⁷ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 54.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 55.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 65.

people of all walks of life, religious affiliation, culture, education, morality, and tradition.

It is not some kind of newly enlightened human perspective or some kind of enlightened *liberal* anthropology that drives Barth here, but rather his conviction about the nature of God's being. The two clear commitments of *Romans* 1919 are, first, that God is creative, and that God is free. According to Barth, true divine, free creativity through the power of the resurrection means that God truly is creating something new in world history. And God is doing this through God's relationship to *persons*, not necessarily to so-called world events, or the flow of history, or through cultural, economic or political superiority. Barth made it clear in his exposition of Rom 3–4 that the resurrection of Christ is not a miracle to be relegated to the unenlightened chapter of history, but a living sign of God's self-revelation among all peoples on earth. It is an event that has unleashed God's creative and creational divine power in history for people. In this way, he pulled the Christian faith out from under the thick blanket of European colonial imagination.

Although Barth may have gained many critics and maybe even lost friends over *Romans* 1919, the God who found him is a God of freedom. Many scholars have called this feature of the *Romans* commentaries (1919 and 1922) a "viewpoint from God."⁵⁰ While it can be disputed whether this is possible in Christian theology at all, Barth's commitment to this viewpoint allowed him to free his own mind from the imperialist imagination that pervaded much of the Christian theology he had learned in German universities. *Romans* 1919 is evidence of Barth's evolving belief that Christian theology had to be separated from all political and cultural ambitions. It is early evidence of Barth's belief in human freedom *from* imperialistic political structures, and ideologies.

What makes Barth's "viewpoint from God" here so friendly to a postcolonial theology is his openness to the new people of God. Barth's eschatological view of a new world and new humanity points to (but does not really reach) a place that could be friendly to postcolonial discourse. It opens the door to hybrid understandings of Christian traditions and doctrines that could arise from intercultural and cross-cultural exchange. The new people of God, in all their variety and in all their difference, get to *write history*. They get to say what it means *for them* to live in the promises and fullness of God, just as Paul got to say what it meant for him to experience God in his own ancient context. Barth not only distinguishes global humanity from the European imagination, but he also alters the power

⁵⁰ David Congdon has called it an "eschatological anti-imperialism." See Congdon, "Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission," 408.

structures regarding who gets to write and speak about living in God's promises. In other words, he suggested in his exegesis that there should no longer be a single narrative about God's activity in history.

Barth's expanded his anti-colonial understanding of God in his exegesis of Rom 5, which he fittingly titles, "The Day: The New Situation."⁵¹ Barth depicted a Divine Subject who is fully in control of God's own subjectivity but who yearns and seeks out humanity for the sake of peace and reconciliation. The reader of Barth's exegesis on Rom 5 here can feel the energy of this living God. Barth claimed that we have heard the Word: "I create. I atone. I make things live. I am the A and the O."⁵² Elsewhere Barth continued, "Life is only one thing: the Creative life of God's own Being [*Schöpferleben Gottes*]."⁵³ And further, Barth wrote regarding verses 3–5, "We know God as the Creator, as the Living One."⁵⁴ But this God is not simply a Divine Judge who comes to the cross for the sake of his honor. This God is the one who creates *life* and who creates *new realities*. Barth wrote:

Joyfully, God looks upon God's world, joyfully, the world may stand and grow in the power of God. God is no longer the distant Accuser, Fighter, or Judge over and against a reality that is godless [*gottfremden Welt*], but God has taken the side of being near to the world, God wants to be present to it and its own, deep content and ground.⁵⁵

This is no metaphysical God who dwells in a realm of supernature that science or theology can never get a handle on. This is a God who is near to history, who works in history, but who works in history to bring about something that humans can only experience and receive. Scientific optimism, intellectual prowess, cultural superiority have no control over this Free Creator who hovers near, who draws near, and who is near in order to move us from "imprisonment to the liberation of the truth."⁵⁶ Jesus is the one who liberates us from the prisons of our imaginations and the "death-dealing forces" of the world as we know it. Barth reiterates this throughout *Romans 1919*. This God brings peace. Barth wrote, "We have *peace with God*."⁵⁷ Peace does not come through national ambition or political violence.

51 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 146ss.

52 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 146.

53 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 148.

54 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 155.

55 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 148.

56 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 149.

57 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 147–48.

6 Barth's Blindspots and Anti-Imperialism Throughout His Mature Dogmatics

Barth's anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist theology in *Romans* 1919 laid the foundation for his future theological commitments. God's freedom and commitment to humanity became one of Barth's most important theological insights.⁵⁸ His theology in the *Church Dogmatics* deepened his critique of any ideology, philosophy or theology that denied the humanity of those across the globe, and it called for Christianity as a faith system to free itself from all forms of imperialism and empire-building. His involvement in the Barmen Declaration was another very public instance of his theology being used to combat the imperialistic ambitions of the German nation taking over the Christian faith.⁵⁹ In his theology of the "command of God," in his mature *Church Dogmatics*, Barth critiqued all the ways in which nations dominate other nations; for him in particular, the issue was the domination of capitalism and its ill-effects upon the world's countries. He wrote that Christianity must always find itself on the "side of the victims" of the various disorders of imperialism and domination.⁶⁰

And yet, Barth's theology did not actively engage voices across the world who were doing Christian theology and spreading the Gospel. Although his son, Christoph, was a missionary in Indonesia for many years, and although he visited Barth and the family in Switzerland, it seems that Barth never really pondered a theological method or framework for hybridity in theological thought. Postcolonial theology seeks hybridity, or the diversity of cultural impacts upon talk of God. Assuming that Karl Barth, who was close with his son, Christoph, learned so much about Christianity in Indonesia, its own particular experiences of God did not seem to make it into Barth's dogmatic reflections in any kind of explicit way. On the other hand, theologians today across cultures have found Barth's language of God as a "missional" God, or the *missio Dei* to be very fruitful in their understandings of how a variety of cultures can speak au-

58 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 12 vol., ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1976), II/1 and II/2 for Barth's doctrine of the freedom of God.

59 See Cynthia L. Rigby, "Karl Barth," in Kwok Pui-Lan et al. ed., *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 341. See also Amy Marga, "Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration," in Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, ed., *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 177–92.

60 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 544.

thoritatively about God's revelation.⁶¹ Hopefully, an essay like this one will open up new vistas onto the wide expanse of Barth's theology beyond the *Romans 1919* commentary. It seems that the postcolonial goal of achieving forms of hybridity within Christian theology can find inspiration in Barth's thought as well, even as he himself never truly became a post-colonial thinker. But anti-imperial, Barth certainly was.

7 Conclusion

The language of creativity, liberation, and peace opens up Christian theology to many narratives about the goodness and creativity of God, to which people across cultures and across the world can relate. Barth's commitment to a concept of God who is "infinitely qualitatively different" from humanity, his rejection of an empathetic biblical hermeneutics that felt the need to make the "other" look like the European interpreter himself, and his criticism of European historical optimism set down the tracks for new criteria for Christian thought. But the "real reality," so to speak, is that even postcolonial methods and frameworks can turn out in the end to be not much more than idols and theoretical straight-jackets. Postcolonial theory is not immune from becoming an "-ism." In all those places and situations where people are trapped within their cultural frameworks and expectations, Barth's version of Christianity can offer a framework for cultural and political critique, as well as a sense of hope and new reality. Barth's experimental read of Paul's letter to the Romans offers a way for people to write their own histories of their experiences of God that need not be dictated by a colonial power. *Romans 1919* presents a God against imperialism and a Christianity without colonialism before the scholarly discourse about anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism made its appearance in Christian academic thought.

⁶¹ See for example, Daniel D. Lee, *Double Particularity: Karl Barth, Contextuality, and Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1kgqtnb>.

Matthias D. Wüthrich

Marcionism in Barth's Theology? Clarifications and Developments

Abstract: Ever since the first *Epistle to the Romans* was published, Karl Barth has been accused of espousing Marcionism. Since the early 1920s, the polemical buzzword of “Marcionism” was associated with wide variety of theological assessments. Barth – unlike Adolf von Harnack, for example – distanced himself from all of them. Grappling critically with the allegation of Marcionism allowed Barth, first in the second *Epistle to the Romans* and subsequently in his dogmatics, to develop a concept of the goodness of creation that neither negates human suffering in a naïvely optimistic way nor pessimistically absolutizes the dark aspects of human existence – a concept which finds its final form in the doctrine of the light and shadowy side of the good creation in *Church Dogmatics III*. Barth's position continues to be viable today, for example in the critical debate with transhumanism and posthumanism.

1 Introduction

In his preface to the second version of his *Epistle to the Romans*, Karl Barth wrote:

Harnack's book on Marcion appeared whilst I was immersed in the writing of my commentary. Those who are familiar with both books will understand why I am bound to refer to it. I was puzzled, upon reading the earlier reviews of Harnack's book, by the remarkable parallels between what Marcion had said and what I was actually writing. I wish to plead for a careful examination of these agreements before I be praised or blamed hastily as though I were a Marcionite. At the crucial points these agreements break down.¹

¹ Preface to Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933; 1968), 13. The German original is: “Als ich mitten in der Arbeit war, erschien Harnacks Buch über *Marcion*. Wer es kennt und in meinem Buch auch nur blättert, wird gleich wissen, warum ich es erwähnen muss. Gewisse frappante Parallelen machten auch mich, als ich die ersten Rezensionen jenes Werkes zu Gesicht bekam, stutzig. Ich möchte aber bitten, hier und dort genau zuzusehen und mich nicht zu rasch als Marcioniten zu loben oder zu tadeln. Es stimmt nun einmal gerade in den entscheidenden Punkten nicht.” Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich, Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 21 (Preface).

Barth refers to Adolf von Harnack's book *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche*, which was first published in 1921 and translated in 1990 as *Marcion. The Gospel of the Alien God*.²

Barth's statements in the preface are startling. The fact that he himself was puzzled by Harnack's book and found "remarkable parallels" to his *Epistle to the Romans* is just as astonishing as the fact that he apparently thought his readers could not only be capable of blaming him for being a Marcionite, but also of praising him for it. So, what exactly is this accusation of Marcionism against Barth all about?

Although the allegation of Marcionism is frequently and casually thrown about in Barth research, it has not been thoroughly analyzed or discussed so far.³ I would like to examine the allegation of Marcionism leveled against Barth in the context of his first and second version of the *Epistle to the Romans*. In doing so, I will first outline the anatomy of the debate in a historical-genetic perspective (1). In a second step, I will use an excerpt from Romans 8 to examine whether there is any form of Marcionism to be found in Barth's *Epistles* (2). In a third step, I will present some examples of Barth's reappraisal of the Marcionism allegation and his reception of Marcionism (3). And finally, I would like to reflect on the relevance of Barth's position to the present day and to talk about *trans-humanism* and *posthumanism* in this context. (4) At first glance, this reference may seem a little unusual and far-fetched, but I want to show that Barth's way of dealing with Marcionism certainly allows for references to the present day.

2 Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott. Eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1921); Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990).

3 Two seminal works from German Barth research can serve as an example. In the two anthologies: *Barth Handbuch*, ed. Michael Beintker (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016); *Karl Barth in Deutschland (1921–1935). Aufbruch – Klärung – Widerstand*, eds. Michael Beintker, Christian Link and Michael Trowitzsch (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005), the name "Marcion" is used only in passing in connection with Barth's theology. – In the English anthologies of most recent Barth research, the name "Marcion" or the term "Marcionism" do not even show up in the register, cf. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth. Barth and Dogmatics, Vol. I and II*, eds. George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2020); *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, eds. Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). In contrast, a substantial contribution, including on Barth research, is offered by Wolfram Kinzig, *Harnack, Marcion und das Judentum. Nebst einer kommentierten Edition des Briefwechsels Adolf von Harnacks mit Houston Stewart Chamberlain* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004), esp. 110–16 and 136–39.

First of all, however, I will provide a brief outline of the confused situation of the debate. After all, the topic of “Marcionism” has been discussed very controversially.

2 On the Debates Concerning Marcionism in the Early 1920s

The debate does not begin with the publication of Harnack's book on Marcion. As early as 1920, *Adolf Jülicher* compares Barth with Marcion in his detailed review of the first version of *Epistle to the Romans*. Jülicher writes: “Marcion [...] held the same position as Karl Barth in his exegesis of Paul. He proceeded with the same sovereign arbitrariness and assurance of victory, with the same one-sided dualistic approach of enmity to all that comes from the world, culture, or tradition [...]” Jülicher goes on to claim that just like Marcion, Barth represents a “radical dualism of all or nothing.”⁴ However, if we look for a more precise and detailed justification of Jülicher's superficial comparison, we look in vain.

In a 1921 article, the young New Testament scholar *Karl Ludwig Schmidt* discusses the contemporary relevance of Harnack's interpretation of Marcion and identifies parallels between Marcion's dualism, Harnack, and Dialectical Theology. For Schmidt, however, this does not detract from the value of Dialectical Theology at all – indeed he understands it as a rediscovery of the Gospel.⁵

Yet another perspective is offered by the pastor of Premslin, *Arnold Hein*, in an article on Practical Theology. He argues that the “modern Marcionism” of Dialectical Theology will destroy the church (“Volkskirche”). Here, the term Marcionism clearly has negative associations.⁶

⁴ Adolf Jülicher, “A Modern Interpreter of Paul,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology Vol. 1*, ed. James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 78–79; German original: Adolf Jülicher, “Ein moderner Paulus-Ausleger,” in *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie Teil 1. Karl Barth – Heinrich Barth – Emil Brunner*, ed. Jürgen Moltmann, TB 17 (Munich: Kaiser, 1962), 87–98, 95. Jülicher's text was originally printed in *Die Christliche Welt* 34/29 (1920): 453–57.

⁵ Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “Marcion und wir: Die Gegenwartsbedeutung von Harnacks Marcion,” *Kartell-Zeitung. Organ des Eisenacher Kartells akademisch-theologischer Vereine* 31 (1920/21): 83–85. The following discussion in this chapter is based on Kinzig, *Harnack*, 110–16.

⁶ Arnold Hein, “Moderner Marcionismus und praktische Theologie,” *Theologische Blätter* 32,6–7 (1922): 124–30, 145–52.

However, what really fired up the debate on Marcionism was a talk given by Reformed church historian *Erich Foerster*. On October 3, 1921, in Eisenach, Foerster addressed the “friends of *Die Christliche Welt*” in a talk that was titled “*Marcionite Christianity: The Belief in God the Creator and the Belief in God the Redeemer.*” In this talk, Foerster identifies “a revival of Marcionitism” (“eine Erneuerung des Marcionitismus”)⁷ in the theology of Barth and his allies. According to Foerster, their movement was significantly boosted by Harnack’s book on Marcion, since Harnack presented Marcionism almost unreservedly as a positive role model. With this assessment, Foerster not only criticizes Barth and his allies, but also his venerated teacher Harnack.

On what aspects does Foerster base his verdict of Barth’s Marcionism? While Jülicher, Schmidt and Hein use the terms of Marcionism or Marcionitism as labels, mostly without getting into the specifics of what, precisely, they mean by it and to what extent it applies to Barth, Foerster provides a more detailed argument: He begins by immediately qualifying his verdict, stating that unlike Marcion, Barth neither rejects the Old Testament nor espouses a doctrine of ditheism. According to Foerster, Barth’s negative judgment of creation does not refer – as in Marcion – to nature as such, but to that which human beings make of it, i. e., to culture. What makes Barth a Marcionite in Foerster’s view is his negative “world feeling” (“Weltgefühl”) and his refusal to contribute to a “Christianization of culture” (“Verchristlichung der Kultur”).⁸ Thus, as Foerster describes it, Barth is not all that consistent in his negation of the world; in fact, Barth’s Marcionism is only a *partial* Marcionism, and for Foerster, the cultural Protestant, this inconsistency is something to give Barth credit for.⁹

Foerster’s lecture was later published in *Die Christliche Welt* and discussed controversially. But he already met strong opposition at the Eisenach conference itself. It was Harnack himself, no less, who vehemently opposed the association

7 The lecture, held in German, was printed as: Erich Foerster, “Marcionitisches Christentum: Der Glaube an den Schöpfergott und der Glaube an den Erlösergott,” *Christliche Welt* 35 (1921): 809–27, 813.

8 Foerster, “Marcionitisches Christentum,” 813–14. Cf. also 817–18.

9 However, Foerster puts up this thesis against Barth: “The Protestant belief of salvation is destroyed if one tears away from its foundation the gratitude towards the world, and from its contents obedience to the world, nature, and culture.” Translation by Matthias Wüthrich and Martina Sitling, the German original is: “Der evangelische Heilsglaube wird zerstört, wenn man aus seinem Grunde die Dankbarkeit gegen die Welt und aus seinem Gehalte den Gehorsam gegen Welt, Natur und Kultur in Einem herausbricht.” Foerster, “Marcionitisches Christentum,” 820–21.

Foerster had established between Marcion and Barth.¹⁰ But why was Harnack so opposed to this idea?

To understand Harnack's reaction, we must call to mind the final passage of his book on Marcion. Here, Harnack presents some weighty criticism of Marcion.¹¹ But this criticism cannot belie the deep sympathy that Harnack harbors for Marcion and that repeatedly shines through in his book.¹² In the final sentence, Harnack even states that "one can only wish that in the chaotic chorus of those who seek after God even Marcionites might once again be found today [...]."¹³

With this in mind, it is easier to understand why Harnack was opposed to Foerster establishing such a close link between Barth and Marcion. Harnack's identification with Marcion was much too intense for him to be able to accept Foerster's verdict of a Barthian Marcionism. Reading Harnack's book on Marcion, we can of course clearly see why Foerster connects Marcion and Barth, as it indeed contains statements that show a certain affinity to those in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. For example, Harnack praises Marcion thusly: "But to feel this [...] is possible only for one for whom the 'Wholly Other,' the 'Alien,' has become manifest – manifest as the *power of love*, and not only as something subjectively *but also as objectively new*."¹⁴

In light of Harnack's deep sympathy for Marcion, it may seem somewhat strange that Harnack, in an open letter to Barth published in *Die Christliche Welt* in 1923, accuses him of cutting the ties between faith and human nature – like Marcion.¹⁵

10 Cf. the transcript of the Eisenach lecture and the subsequent discussion, as well as the excerpts of Martin Rade's letter to Barth printed in: Kinzig, *Harnack*, 112, note 376.

11 Cf. Harnack, *Marcion*, 144–45.

12 Cf. for example: "This much is certain – that in church history and in the philosophy of religion the Marcionite gospel has hardly ever again been proclaimed, or at least as a rule has not been the result of a deeper and richer religious experience, but rather a sign of religious dullness and stagnant dependence on tradition." Harnack, *Marcion*, 144. Also cf. Kinzig, *Harnack*, 149.

13 Harnack, *Marcion*, 145.

14 Harnack, *Marcion*, 141. Italics in original.

15 Harnack, "Offener Brief an Herrn Professor Barth," *Christliche Welt* 37 (1923), printed in Karl Barth, *Offene Briefe 1909–1935*, ed. Diether Koch, Gesamtausgabe V.35 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2001), 69. On the context of the correspondence cf. Hartmut Ruddies, "Evangelium und Kultur: Die Kontroverse zwischen Adolf von Harnack und Karl Barth," in *Adolf von Harnack, Theologe, Historiker, Wissenschaftspolitiker*, eds. Kurt Nowak and Otto Gerhard Oexle, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 161 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 103–26, esp. 120–26; Hans-Anton Drewes, "Die Auseinandersetzung mit Adolf von Harnack," in *Karl Barth in Deutschland, 198–203*, esp. 198ss.

Comparing Barth to Marcion in such a public manner certainly was no accident on Harnack's part. Here, the tensions in Harnack's understanding of Marcion emerge more clearly than ever. In the following chart, one can see the positions discussed up until now:

Assessment of Barth's theology as	
Jülicher	Marcionism, negative
Schmidt	Marcionism, positive
Hein	Marcionism, negative
Foerster	Marcionism, negative (while also criticizing Harnack's sympathies for Marcionism)
Harnack	"Marcionism" not applicable to Barth (since Marcionism is positive): 1921 Marcionism, negative (exchange of letters, 1923)

Looking at the five positions discussed above, one can see that even though all of them apply the term 'Marcionism' (or 'Marcionitism') to Barth, they apply it in either a positive or a negative sense, as praise or accusation, and even a certain closeness to Harnack is established in this way. The chart shows the wide spectrum of opinions on Marcionism. However, it is well worth noting that the term usually is not applied in a very differentiated way, but rather in the sense of a polemical buzzword. How could this have happened, how was it possible that this term came to contain within itself such heterogenous polemical intentions?

Harnack's daughter Agnes von Zahn-Harnack wrote regarding the book's (*Marcion*) great success:

Marcion preached 'the alien God,' i.e., the God that has nothing in common with creation, this miserable, misconceived, and tainted creation, and the whole course of earthly events, because he belongs to a wholly different sphere. This was bound to deeply move readers for whom, through war and revolution, the cruelty, the counter-divine meaninglessness of fate, had become a horrific experience.¹⁶

¹⁶ Trans. Wüthrich and Sitling, the German original is: "Marcion predigte 'den fremden Gott', d.h. den Gott, der mit der Schöpfung, dieser elenden, missratenen und befleckten Schöpfung und mit dem ganzen Ablauf irdischen Geschehens nichts gemein habe, weil er einer ganz anderen Sphäre angehört. Das musste die Leser ergreifen, denen durch Krieg und Revolution die Grausamkeit, die widergöttliche Sinnlosigkeit des Schicksals zum furchtbaren Erlebnis geworden war." Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack* (Berlin-Tempelhof: Hans Bött Verlag, 1936), 511–12 – cited in Karl-Heinz Menke, *Spielarten des Marcionismus in der Geistesgeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2011), 10.

In the atmosphere of crisis during those postwar years, Harnack's book on Marcion struck a chord with the promise of his wholly different, alien God of love who leaves behind the miserable creation in order to redeem and to give solace. I quote Harnack: "*But the gospel is the message of the alien God; he calls us, not out of an alien existence in which we have gone astray and into our true home but out of the dreadful homeland to which we belong into a blessed alien land.*"¹⁷

How can one establish a relation between God and this devastated world, between God and culture? This question marked the precarious zone of negotiation between the Theology of Cultural Protestantism and Dialectical Theology. Church historian Wolfram Kinzig rightly points out that Harnack's book on Marcion falls right in the middle of the timeline of this heavily contested negotiation zone and hits a nerve in terms of its content.¹⁸ Only from this perspective does it become clear why the term "Marcionism" came to be used in such a polemical way, why it was subjected to such conflicting assessments and applied with such conceptual blurriness.

3 Marcionism in Barth's *Epistles to the Romans*?

Our historical observations up to this point advise caution. The question of whether Barth espoused a form of Marcionism in his two versions of the *Epistle to the Romans* cannot be answered with recourse to the undifferentiated way the term was used in the 1920s, as this would only serve to propagate the existing misunderstandings. If we want an answer to our question, we must first specify how we define "Marcionism" and which particular aspect we are referring to. Do we want to focus on a docetic Christology, a ditheistic dualism, a vilification of creation, a condemnation of the law and the Old Testament? Are we concerned with the historical Marcion, or with some kind of "modern" Marcionism?

In what follows, I am not interested in a reconstruction of the historical Marcion, but in his contemporary representation in Harnack's widely read book on Marcion. The question I am asking, then, is whether Barth espouses a form of Marcionism as represented in Harnack's book on Marcion. Moreover, I will focus on only *one* aspect, and that is the interpretation of creation.

Harnack's Marcion does not espouse a gnostic dualism in the sense of a good and an evil divine principle. Rather, Harnack shows that while God the Cre-

¹⁷ Harnack, *Marcion*, 139.

¹⁸ Cf. Kinzig, *Harnack*, 115, 153.

ator is only a pathetic, petty, weak despot, justice continues to be one of his essential characteristics.¹⁹ To somewhat exonerate this demiurge, he proposes that the evilness of creation is also tied to the evilness of matter and connected to the existence of the devil in some unclear way.²⁰ However, Harnack's Marcion also posits that the mere creation of human beings (and not only their sin!) is a grievous tragedy ("eine jämmerliche Tragödie") for which the creator alone is responsible. Man is a spoiled creation, a monster ("Missgeburt").²¹

Does Barth – measured against Harnack's book on Marcion – espouse a form of Marcionism with regard to the creation? As an *example*, I will examine Romans 8, the exegesis of verses 20 and 21. In his *first version of the Epistle to the Romans* (1919), Barth translated these verses like this: "For creation has been subjected to nothingness (*"Nichtigkeit"*), not willingly, but due to the one who subdued it, and in the hope that it, the creation, may also be liberated from the bondage of vanity into the liberty of the children of God."²² In his commentary, Barth emphasizes that it is not nature as such that stands in opposition to the spirit; nature as such is not subject to nothingness. It is man who is at fault, it is man who subjects creation to nothingness – thus introducing suffering and vanity (*"Vergänglichkeit"*) to the cosmos. Here, the notion of God curiously takes a back seat to the nature-immanent process. Therefore, this passage cannot be called Marcionism by any means. The problem of creation is a consequence of sin.²³

Now let us have a look at the same verses in the *second version of the Epistle to the Romans*. Here, Barth translates as follows: "For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God."²⁴ In the German original: "Denn der Leerheit wurde das Geschaffene unterworfen, nicht nach eigenem Willen, sondern durch den Unterwerfer, auf Hoffnung, weil auch es, das Geschaffene, befreit werden wird von der Knechtschaft der Ver-

19 Cf. Harnack, *Marcion*, 69–70. Did Harnack relativize Marcion's dualism of two Gods too strongly? Cf. also Menke, *Spielarten des Marcionismus*, 12–15.

20 Harnack, *Marcion*, 68–70

21 Harnack, *Marcion*, 72–73. Cf. Harnack, *Marcion*, 105.

22 Trans. Wüthrich and Sitling, the German original (italics in original) is: "Denn die Schöpfung wurde der Nichtigkeit untertan, nicht mit eigenem Willen, sondern wegen dessen, der sie untertan machte, und auf Hoffnung darauf, daß auch sie, die Schöpfung, befreit werden soll vom Dienst der Vergänglichkeit zur Freiheit der Kinder Gottes." Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief (Erste Fassung) 1919*, ed. Hermann Schmidt, Gesamtausgabe II.16 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1985), 325.

23 Cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1919*, 325–32, esp. 327.

24 Trans. Hoskyns, Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308.

weslichkeit zur Freiheit der Herrlichkeit der Kinder Gottes.”²⁵ It is interesting that in this version, in the German original, Barth uses the term “Unterwerfer,” i. e., “subjugator.” Who is this subjugator? According to Barth, it is no longer man, as in the *first version* of his *Epistle to the Romans*, but God himself! God himself subjects that which has been created to vanity – is this theocentric shift of emphasis a form of Marcionism, then? In my opinion, it is not. In the *second Epistle to the Romans*, it is just as clear that while God is the one who subjects creation to vanity, the reason for this is still human sin, and not a deficient state of creation as such.²⁶ Because, as Barth emphasizes, beyond the horrors and the loveliness of creation, there is, after all, a “divine secret in the COSMOS” (“göttliche[s] Geheimnis des Kosmos”), a creation in the creature, “God in the COSMOS”!²⁷ Therefore, when it comes to creation theology, Barth rejects both an optimism that refuses to see the vanity of creation, and a pessimism which complains that “the world is in itself evil, that it is created in vanity – willingly, or the plaything, maybe, of some demiurge.”²⁸ It is certainly no accident that Barth chooses the term ‘demiurge’ here in relation to the pessimistic interpretation of creation that he rejects, as the term ‘demiurge’ is reminiscent of Marcion. But Barth wants to leave this Marcionite pessimism behind, and thus continues as follows: “Beyond pessimism and optimism, where the origin of the vanity of the COSMOS in the unobservable Fall of the creature from the Creator is apprehended – there emerges hope, hope of the restoration of the unobservable union between the Creator and the creature, through the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.”²⁹

With this sentence, Barth clarifies once again: Here, God the Redeemer is God the Creator. Barth wrote these lines not only with the accusation of Marcionism leveled against him in mind, but also with a view to Harnack’s book on Marcion. Barth’s concept of creation charts a path between the poles of optimism and pessimism – and therefore also lets Marcion fall by the wayside.

25 Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 414.

26 Barth writes: “Vanity is not the creature’s primal constitution.” Trans. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309. In German: “Die ‘Leerheit’ des Geschaffenen ist [...] keine Gegebenheit erster Ordnung.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 424.

27 Trans. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 308–309, cf. Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 423.

28 Trans. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309. The German original is: “von einer an sich bösen Welt, von einer ‘nach eigenem Willen’ oder auch nach dem eines Demiurgen ‘leeren’ Schöpfung.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 424.

29 Trans. Hoskyns, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 309. The German original is: “Jenseits von Optimismus und Pessimismus, dort wo die ‘Leerheit’ des Kosmos in ihrem Ursprung, als der unanschauliche Abfall des Geschöpfes vom Schöpfer begriffen wird, dort ist auch Hoffnung, Hoffnung auf die durch Kreuz und Auferstehung des Christus wieder hergestellte unanschauliche *Einheit* von Schöpfer und Geschöpf.” Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 424.

While the name Marcion does not even appear in the *first Epistle to the Romans*, Barth mentions it prominently not only in the preface to the *second Epistle*, but also several times throughout the commentary itself. Even more than the mere mentioning of the name, it is the thought structures themselves in which Barth, in several instances, implicitly and subtly tries to extricate himself from the suspicion of Marcionism. In my opinion, the Marcionism allegation is much more present than previously thought – and not only with regard to creation.³⁰

As our very small sample study shows, at least regarding the topic of creation, and compared to Harnack's book on Marcion, Barth's contemporaries made a mistake in accusing him of Marcionism – at least with regard to Barth's *own intention* in dealing with Marcion, which can be reconstructed looking at the two *Epistles to the Romans*. This applies even more to Barth's approach to the Old Testament. Another and much more difficult question is whether Barth's concept of the origin may suggest an identification of the creatureliness and sinful nature of human beings that implicitly proposes the fundamentally problematic nature of that which has been created, which would put Barth, albeit unintentionally, in a certain proximity to Harnack's Marcion after all.³¹ This question would require its own examination and cannot be discussed here.

However, all things considered, the allegations leveled at Barth by Jülicher, Schmidt, Hein and also Foerster were really far too sweeping to be true. It would make more sense to agree with Harnack when he complains about associating Barth with Marcion. Harnack himself was much closer to his historical reconstruction of 'Marcion' than Barth – at least to certain aspects of it.³²

30 For example, compare Barth's explicit criticism of Marcionite law criticism and Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 331, 333.

31 After all, Hans Urs von Balthasar's observation regarding the "dialectical ambiguity" of Barth's "portrait of the creature" in the two *Epistles to the Romans* is not entirely wrong. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth. Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976), 256, cf. 71–79, especially the allegation on page 78 (here in allusion to Marcionism?). Cf. Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der "dialektischen Theologie" Karl Barths. Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der Kirchlichen Dogmatik*, BEvTh 101 (Munich: Kaiser, 1987), 70 (cf. 66–71 and 222–30). In contrast, cf. the important criticism of Balthasar in this matter: Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1995), 149–150.

32 A differentiated view can be found in: Kinzig, *Harnack*, 41–153, esp. 149, 153. Cf. also Menke, who, based on a historic reconstruction of Marcion's theology, judges von Harnack's position to be Marcionite and Barth's position to be anti-Marcionite, but without explicitly referring to the theology of creation, *Spielarten des Marcionismus*, 16–22.

4 Barth's Late Rejection of Marcion

Ever since the first version of the *Epistle to the Romans* was published, Barth's theology has been beset by the allegation of Marcionism.³³ It is very illuminating to take a closer look at Barth's attempts to come to terms with the accusation of Marcionism leveled against him and at his own reception of Marcion in his later *Dogmatics*:

In these works, Barth only addresses select aspects of Marcion's theology. His main points of engagement with Marcion are the latter's understanding of the Scripture and his Israel theology – and in these matters, Barth's rejection is quite clear. However, what I find more interesting is how Barth grapples with Marcion in the context of the doctrine of creation.

From 1924/1925 onwards, Barth starts to address the problem of Marcion more thoroughly with regard to his own theology of creation. For he was very much aware of the allegation, connected to the Marcionism accusation, to have failed to properly honor the (goodness of) creation: "How often have I been confronted in the last years with the reproachful question: But where is creation?"³⁴ It is all the more surprising, then, that Barth's seems to glean a morsel of truth from Marcion's theology of creation after all. For example, in the second volume of his *Göttingen Dogmatics, Instruction in the Christian Religion* (1924/25), he writes: "Protestantism would have done well to take the problem of Marcion more seriously than it did."³⁵ And Barth indeed makes some allowances for Marcion's *pessimistic* view on creation in contrast to the overly *optimistic* view of Enlightenment.³⁶ It is also fascinating to see that in dealing with this pessimistic and optimistic view of creation, Barth talks of a shadowy side and a light side of creation, and that at this point, apparently the shadowy side can still be as-

33 To give another, later example: Heinrich Kayser, "Natur und Gott bei Marcion: Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Entstehung der Religion," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 101 (1929): 279–96; Barth and Gogarten as worthy successors of Marcion (294–96). Cf. also Kinzig, *Hamack*, 135.

34 Trans. Wüthrich and Sitling, the German original is: "Wie oft ist mir in den letzten Jahren die Frage: Wo bleibt die Schöpfung? protestierend entgegengehalten worden." Karl Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion. Band II: Die Lehre von Gott/Die Lehre vom Menschen* (1924/25), Gesamtausgabe II.20 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1990), 219.

35 Trans. Wüthrich and Sitling, the German original is: "es hätte [...] dem Protestantismus wohl angestanden, das Marcionproblem ernster zu nehmen, als es geschehen ist." Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, Bd. II, 291.

36 Cf. Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, Bd. II, 238, 244, in the argumentative context of the question of the goodness of creation: 237–44.

signed to the pessimistic view and the light side to the optimistic view.³⁷ In light of this tension, I would like to put forth the following hypothesis: *Barth's engagement with Marcion is an important and continuous factor in the development of the doctrine of the light and shadowy side of the good creation, which finds its final form in Church Dogmatics III.*

I cannot further explicate this hypothesis here, but to make it more plausible, I at least want to take a brief look at Barth's late doctrine of creation in his *Church Dogmatics* and to show how Barth talks about the light side and the shadowy side of creation there:

What is the differentiation of the light and shadowy side about? Barth not only differentiated between the good creation and evil, or "das Nichtige,"³⁸ as he later calls it (and which can only be unsatisfactorily translated as "nothingness" in English). Within the good creation, he again differentiated between two sides: the light side and the shadowy side. In the creaturely world, there is not only a light, beautiful, joyful side – what you may call the sunny or bright side of life. The creaturely world also has a negative side to it, a side that is *threatened at its margins by nothingness*, that is in a sense adjacent to it: that is the shadowy side of creation. Within creation, there is a No, there are abysses, obscurities, indigence, worthlessness, failure, tears, loss, mortality... It may well be that the shares of the light and the shadowy side are allotted according to a well-concealed justice. However, Barth believes that creation, which has been created in orientation towards Jesus Christ, in all its duality, in its inner contradiction, in its entirety and totality, is perfect and good,³⁹ even very good.

To be sure, the negative aspect of creation is a reminder of this threat and corruption. But it is not the case that because creation has this shadowy side it is itself their victim and therefore belongs to nothingness. When Jesus Christ shall finally return as the Lord and Head of all that God has created, it will also be revealed that both in light *and* shadow, on the right hand *and* on the left, everything created was very good and supremely glorious.⁴⁰

The shadowy side is a part of God's good creation; however, according to Barth, nothingness is not a part of the good creation in any way. In fact, nothingness is the absolute opposite of both creator and creature. Nothingness is nothing less

³⁷ Cf. Barth, *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*, Bd. II, 241, 244.

³⁸ On this topic cf. Matthias D. Wüthrich, *Gott und das Nichtige. Eine Untersuchung zur Rede vom Nichtigen ausgehend von §50 der Kirchlichen Dogmatik Karl Barths* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2006).

³⁹ Cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/1, §42.3, esp. 371–77; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, 424–30; and *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 297–301; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3, 334–39.

⁴⁰ *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 296; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3, 335–36.

than the “primal antithesis” of the two-sided totality of God’s creation. Wolf Krötke and others have rightly pointed out that Barth ultimately fails to completely uphold the difference between the shadowy side and nothingness.⁴¹ But his intention to maintain the difference is constitutive, at least for *Church Dogmatics* III (esp. III/3).

However, what is most fascinating to see now is this: In *Church Dogmatics* III/1, Barth arrives at his concept of the shadowy side *by taking up and rejecting* Marcion’s and Schopenhauer’s pessimism, and at his concept of the light side mostly by taking up and rejecting the optimism espoused by Leibniz.⁴² Rejecting both pessimism (particularly as embodied by Marcion) and optimism (particularly as embodied by Leibniz) while at the same time discerningly including their elements of truth is a figure of thought that already starts to form in Barth’s *Göttingen Dogmatics, Instruction in the Christian Religion* (1924/25). It reaches full maturity in the Christologically founded doctrine of the perfect unity of the light and the shadowy side as the good creation in *Church Dogmatics* III/1.

Here, several references of pessimism and optimism on the doctrine of the light and shadowy side can be traced: a) the doctrine of the light and the shadowy sides clearly rejects both pessimism and optimism, but takes up partial elements of truth; b) these elements of truth, however, are fundamentally transformed in the doctrine of the light and the shadowy sides insofar as they are c) merged into a constitutive unity of the different and d) justified Christologically and suspended eschatologically.⁴³

With this figure of thought in his Creation Theology, Barth definitively freed himself from the accusation of Marcionism. Of course, by doing so, he also incurred some new problems – but I cannot go into that matter here and now. Instead, let me highlight a strength of this doctrine of the light and the shadowy side: The distinction between the light and the shadowy side of the good creation has allowed Barth to insert a new difference into the distinction between nothingness and the good creation that helps him to get a firmer, more precise grasp of the

⁴¹ Wolf Krötke, *Sünde und Nichtiges bei Karl Barth*, NBST 3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, ²1983), e. g. 26–27, 32.

⁴² On distancing it from Marcion (and Schopenhauer): *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 335–41; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, 382–89. On distancing it from Leibniz: *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 389–394; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, 446–51; cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 404ss; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, 463ss. On optimism (including Leibniz) in general, cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 301.318–22; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3, 340.360–65.

⁴³ Cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/1, 384–85; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/1, 440. It is however striking that in *Church Dogmatics* III/3 Barth no longer speaks of an eschatological suspension of the contradiction between the light and the shadowy side of creation. Cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 296; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/3, 335–36.

concept of physical evil. Physical evil can either belong to nothingness or to the shadowy side of good creation. Not every physical evil is to be attributed to nothingness; there are also evils that belong to the shadowy side of God's good creation. Not all physical suffering that we subjectively experience as evil is a manifestation of nothingness, something that God rejects and does not will. There is also physical suffering that – albeit in quite a concealed way – still is in accordance with God's positive creative will. There also exists a creaturely suffering that cannot be simply called evil, but that can also be good – if one sees it in the light of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of the light and the shadowy side of creation allows Barth to conceive of a fragility and vulnerability of creatureliness that is only indirectly tied to the problem of sin. The above-mentioned transformation of the concept of evil also allows Barth later, in *Church Dogmatics* III/4,⁴⁴ to conceive of a more differentiated theological perspective on the phenomenon of sickness. With the doctrine of the light and the shadowy side of creation, Barth's theology is imbued with a *heightened sensitivity for the question of suffering*. It also is one of the reasons why Barth's thought differs so strikingly from the classical theodicies.⁴⁵

In retrospect, maybe it was not such a bad thing that Barth was accused of Marcionism. After all, Barth's theological processing of this accusation was highly productive and had far-reaching consequences for his theology of creation (even though there certainly were other factors at play, as well). *Not least of all it could be due to Barth's confrontation with the allegation of Marcionism that the question about the goodness of creation found his attention in terms of systematic theology, which hardly can be observed in this intensity in modern dogmatics before him.*⁴⁶

5 A Look at the Current Debates on Transhumanism and Posthumanism

If we ask whether Barth's engagement with Marcionism is of any contemporary relevance, one of the topics that presents itself in the context of the much-dis-

⁴⁴ Cf. *Church Dogmatics* III/4, 359–77; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/4, 404–26.

⁴⁵ Regarding this, cf. my article in the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*: Matthias D. Wüthrich, "An Entirely Different 'Theodicy'. Karl Barth's Interpretation of Human Suffering in the Context of his Doctrine of *das Nichtige*," *IJST* Vol. 23/4, 2022, 593-616.

⁴⁶ Christian Link already pointed out that the question of the goodness of creation holds extraordinary weight for Barth. Christian Link, *Schöpfung. Schöpfungstheologie in reformatorischer Tradition*, HSTh 7/1 (Gütersloh: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 293.

cussed issue of digitalization is the topic of “transhumanism” and “posthumanism.” Of course, the heretic grace theologian Marcion and the at best implicitly religious concepts of trans- and posthumanism can only be compared to a very limited degree. But there is a certain parallel to be seen in the fact that the trans- and posthumanist theories, too, seriously question the goodness of the world, and particularly that of human beings.⁴⁷

In the case of *transhumanism*, this is somewhat less pronounced. After all, transhumanism only wants to advance the development of human beings through technology and to perfect them as humans x.0. The major goal of transhumanists is to extend the human lifespan. Death is not a part of the good finiteness of human beings. The ultimate goal is human immortality. Thus, in the case of transhumanism, we only deal with a negative worldview to the extent that the present condition of human beings is judged negatively. But at its core, transhumanism is a hopelessly *optimistic theory*: technology is the medium that can steer human beings ever closer to perfection.

However, things are different with *posthumanism*, as the aim of posthumanism is not to merely improve human beings, but to transcend them. Posthumanism wants to create an artificial alterity that leaves the human species behind. Here, it is no longer human beings who are the center of attention, but the creation of a machine-based superspecies, an artificial superintelligence, e.g., via “mind uploading,” where the human mind is scanned and uploaded to computers. Thus, posthumanism represents a clearly *pessimistic* worldview.

In his confrontation with Marcionism, Barth developed an understanding of the goodness of creation that contradicts both the perfection optimism of transhumanism and the world-eschewing pessimism of posthumanism in a fundamental way. Trans- and posthumanism are guided by the secret desire to take life into one's own hands, to control it and to eliminate all suffering from the world. Both concepts are lacking precisely that which characterizes Barth's concept of creation in the 20th century: his sensitivity towards the fact that human suffering can be understood not only, but sometimes indeed also as a part of God's *good* creation. According to Barth, there are no criteria of judgment available to humans regarding the goodness of creation except God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. And this means: Wherein the goodness of creation lies is withheld from general human knowledge; it is God's secret that only ever is revealed in faith. *The goodness of creation is beyond good and evil!*

⁴⁷ Admittedly, the following characterization is very simplified and somewhat exaggerated! For a more nuanced presentation that differentiates between transhumanism and (technological) posthumanism in the same way, cf. Janina Loh, *Trans- und Posthumanismus. Zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2018).



VII Religion, Liturgy and Theology

Pierre Gisel

Que penser et que faire de la radicalité à l'œuvre chez Barth ?

Abstract: The *Römerbrief* makes a radical affirmation of a new truth. The contours of such an affirmation require investigation, for it has nothing to do with maximizing belief, such as one might associate with the religious radicalities we see in today's world. The point is, rather, to evoke a *kind* of posture which relates to faith, a *kind* of affirmation which relates to the word «God». A deeper look at Barth's text requires a close consideration of the relation between the «church of Esau» and the «church of Jacob». Barth insists both on being «under the law», in relation to the «church of Esau», and thus on the incommensurable human particularity at play here (namely, Judaism), as well as on the fact that the «church of Esau» and the «church of Jacob» both have to do with one and the same church. The text thus leads to a questioning of Barth's claims – a questioning which concerns the status and shape of the Christological dimension – which leads in turn to a sketch of possible improvements to his position. The aim is to retrieve his stance while preventing some potential problems which may be intrinsic to it.

1 Introduction

Dans le présent exposé, j'ai choisi un seul axe d'interrogation. Et je vais m'efforcer de le profiler de manière plutôt nette, mais hors caricature j'espère. Je vais par ailleurs me consacrer au *Römerbrief* en sa seconde édition, de 1922,¹ sans référence directe à la littérature qu'il a occasionnée.²

Ce qui va me retenir, c'est – mon titre l'annonce – la radicalité. Une forme de radicalité sous-tend en effet la posture de Barth. Je vais en donner une série d'aspects, à même le texte. Mais, à l'horizon de mon questionnement, je ne me

1 Karl Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, trad. Pierre Jundt (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1972, ²2016) ; original : *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, éd. Cornelis van der Kooi et Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010).

2 En français, indiquons simplement Christophe Chalamet, *Théologies dialectiques. Aux origines d'une révolution intellectuelle* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2015), 136–41 et 150–67 pour le *Römerbrief* 1^{ère} et 2^e édition ; Denis Müller, *Karl Barth* (Paris : Cerf, 2005) ; Jean-Louis Leuba, *Études barthiennes* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1986).

cache pas qu'une radicalité est au cœur de l'Évangile même, ni qu'une radicalité a porté et porte le protestantisme (est-ce que Barth en donne ici une forme exacerbée ? on peut se le demander).³ En outre, dire aujourd'hui radicalité ne peut pas ne pas faire résonner le phénomène typique de notre postmodernité qu'il est convenu d'appeler radicalités religieuses (pour nous, l'évangélisme protestant, ailleurs le salafisme). Du coup, avec la question de la radicalité est de fait touchée celle de la forme qu'il convient de donner au christianisme au cœur de la société contemporaine, tout au moins en Europe et en Amérique du Nord.

Dans mon premier point, je vais circonscrire ce que j'appelle radicalité dans le texte de Barth, et m'efforcer de bien la préciser, à l'encontre de manières erronées qu'on pourrait avoir de la comprendre au premier abord ou en isolant telle ou telle de ses expressions. Et j'explicitai en quoi le profil de cette radicalité est autre que ce qu'on peut entendre aujourd'hui sous ce terme. Il n'empêche – et ce seront mes points 3 et 4, couplés – que, même démarquée de mauvaises ou trop rapides lectures, la radicalité à l'œuvre chez Barth présente une forme qui demeure à mon sens problématique, liée à une unilatéralité pouvant prêter à reprises égarantes, voire pires. En final – point 5 –, j'esquisserai, au titre d'une proposition, en quoi des correctifs doivent et peuvent être ici mis en avant, ou comment il conviendrait, pour en prévenir les dangers, d'insérer ce qui sous-tend la posture de Barth dans un contexte plus large, où elle pourrait faire valoir sa force et sa vérité hors les risques évoqués.

2 Une radicalité à l'œuvre, mais à bien cerner

Rappelons d'abord que le *Commentaire* de Barth ne relève pas d'une entreprise historico-critique, entreprise laissée de côté en ce qu'elle rapporterait tout au contexte et ne se confronterait pas à ce qui se dit dans le texte. Pour autant, passer – ou avoir passé – par l'historico-critique n'est en rien récusé.⁴ L'enjeu tient à ce que Barth entend centrer sur l'«affaire» (la *Sache*) du texte, qui est notre affaire et l'affaire de Dieu, une affaire qui, précise-t-il, n'est, pour Paul, pas «en lui», mais «au-dessus de lui».⁵ Elle n'est rien de moins que «vérité de

³ Barth assume en tout cas qu'il se trouve là «sur le terrain de la Réforme» (*L'Épître aux Romains*, 489) et l'assume sans trace de décentrement critique.

⁴ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 14–16, 19, 23.

⁵ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 35.

Dieu !»⁶ Mais il convient de bien noter ici que, pour Barth, «*tout est littera*» et «*tout peut être [...] saisi en tant que voix du spiritus*»,⁷ les deux plans étant pris ensemble et sans renvoyer à deux *réalités différentes*. Sur le fond, la perspective ainsi ouverte sous-tend l'ensemble de ce qui va se déployer dans le *Commentaire*.

Enregistrons ce que Barth précise quand il se démarque de ce qu'on avait nommé «*“Vie de Jésus”*». Il y a, dit-il en contraste de ces entreprises, à saisir ce qui est en cause selon un «*plan, inconnu de nous*», un plan qui, «*d'en-haut, coupe perpendiculairement le plan que nous connaissons*», ou qui touche «*comme la tangente, un cercle*». ⁸ On notera que Barth aura alors mis en avant le motif de la «*résurrection*», en ce qu'il vaut, chez lui, re-création «*d'entre les morts*», en discontinuité donc.

Pour continuer à saisir le type de rapport qui se noue ici entre l'historique et le théologique, on sera attentif au fait que la manifestation – et l'Annonce – de la vérité, pour Barth, suppose un «*vide*» et «*invalide toutes les intelligences avant-dernières*». ⁹ En cohérence, Barth avance alors, de manière récurrente, qu'y est dite une «*vérité toute nouvelle*». ¹⁰ Faut-il l'entendre au sens de Marcion ? ¹¹ Non, tout au moins pas en ce que l'on penserait à un nouveau message en juxtaposition ou en substitution. Il convient plutôt de voir qu'est en cause une destinée certes «*nouvelle, différente, divine*», mais qui l'est «*de tout temps*» et, ainsi justement, «*abolit, d'elle-même, sa particularité [...], permettant à toute époque de devenir temps de révélation et temps de découverte*». ¹² D'où son : «*Nous ne proclamons pas une nouveauté, mais la vérité essentielle en toutes choses anciennes*». ¹³ J'ajoute que si le régime n'est ici ni de juxtaposition ni de substitution, il n'est pas non plus celui d'un déploiement linéaire :

6 Touchant ce qu'il convient d'entendre ici par «*vérité de Dieu*», les références à Kierkegaard (ici 11, 35, 37, 45, 97, et cf. l'index), à Dostoïevski (ici 11) ou à Overbeck (ici 11, 37, 45, 259), peuvent en circonscrire la forme.

7 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 23, préface à la 3^{ème} édition de juillet 1922 (Barth écrit : «*du spiritus (Christi)*»). J'avais souligné ce point, lieu d'un différend entre Barth et Bultmann, dans ma «*Présentation*», in *Karl Barth. Genèse et réception de sa théologie, avec textes de Rudolf Bultmann, Paul Corset, Adolf von Harnack, Eberhard Jüngel, Trutz Rendtorff, Eduard Thurneysen*, éd. Pierre Gisel (Genève : Labor et Fides, 1987), 71–73, ici 73.

8 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 37–38.

9 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 43–44.

10 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 36, je souligne.

11 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 20, 234, 242.

12 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 37, je souligne.

13 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 95.

Nulle transition progressive, nulle ascension graduelle, nulle évolution ne constitue [...] le pas qui franchit la frontière ; au contraire, ici, c'est une rupture brutale ; là-bas, le commencement, sans transition, de quelque chose de tout différent.¹⁴

On notera, sans surprise, que la vérité en cause est alors dite être ni « directe »,¹⁵ ni simple,¹⁶ ou que « "l'Esprit est la négation de l'immédiateté directe" », afin que cette vérité ne soit pas celle d'une « idole », un point mis en avant en invoquant Kierkegaard. Dieu est caché, inconnu, incognito, et cela conditionne le rapport qui s'y noue, un rapport dit de *foi*, mais selon un concept à bien entendre : « pour qu'il y ait occasion de foi, il faut que toutes les choses qui sont objet de foi soient cachées » ; et, en contrepartie : « la foi, c'est : respecter l'incognito divin ». ¹⁷ Dans le prolongement, on lira : « la *pensée non brisée renonce*, d'elle-même, à sa *relation réelle aux choses* » (un énoncé à méditer, qui tranche d'avec la compréhension spontanée et peut être rapproché de Franz Rosenzweig, alors contemporain) ou : « l'âme est étrangère au monde et le monde est sans âme quand ils ne se rencontrent pas *dans la connaissance du Dieu inconnu* ». ¹⁸ En tout cela, il convient de voir que n'est pas en jeu la seule question de l'accès à vérité en cause, mais ce qui en fait la *teneur*, Barth parlant alors d'une « *dialectique intérieure de l'objet* ». ¹⁹

Remarquons que suivre Barth, c'est souvent aller au-delà des alternatives courantes qui balisent le champ des idées et des positions. Aller au-delà, ou ailleurs. C'est dans ce sens qu'il faut entendre qu'il y a une possibilité tierce, *décalée* et *décalante*, faisant voir *tout*, mais *tout autrement*, ou qu'on ne perçoit que si l'on voit *tout*, *tout autrement*.

Si l'on en vient au moment christologique, ce sera pour s'arrêter au (ici en cohérence) : « Jésus, en tant que Christ, *ne* peut être saisi, au sein de la réalité visible de l'Histoire, *que* comme un problème, *que* comme un mythe ». ²⁰ Non donc comme une réalité objective, dût-elle être hors évidence courante. Y est pourtant en jeu, écrit Barth, « une connaissance objective, simple » – il l'oppose aux « expériences vécues », « expériences pratiques » ou « sentiments » ²¹ –,

¹⁴ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 233. Notons encore un motif qui surplombe l'ensemble : il n'est pas question d'accéder à « "des choses divines" » (13), « au-dessus de » (37) ou « supérieures » (42).

¹⁵ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 13, 47, 331.

¹⁶ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 13.

¹⁷ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 44–45

¹⁸ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 53, je souligne ; cf. aussi 79.

¹⁹ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 17.

²⁰ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 37.

²¹ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 36.

qu'«en règle générale, nous ignorons», «*mais que nous pourrions aussi parfaitement savoir*».²² De la mise en lumière de cette réalité – présente, mais camouflée ou refoulée –, ainsi que de l'aveuglement à son sujet et de l'impossible-possible qui y est articulés, il y a, de fait aussi, une reprise toujours à neuf, mais du coup *au plan de Dieu*, une «fidélité», qui appelle ou commande une «fidélité» *correspondante au plan humain*, «réciproque»,²³ et alors dite, chez Barth, comme un «obéir»,²⁴ rien d'autre ne pouvant être évoqué, parce que, justement, rien d'autre ne peut être saisi.

Un passage peut résumer la constellation que j'ai tenté de cerner : «Le jugement de Dieu marque la *fin* de l'histoire, et non le commencement d'une nouvelle et seconde histoire. L'histoire est à son terme ; elle ne se continue pas». C'est que là, si «Dieu parle», il est «reconnu comme juge» et qu'en est ouverte une «transformation [...] si radicale qu'elle unit, elle précisément, d'une manière indissoluble, le temps et l'éternité, la justice humaine et la justice de Dieu». Et Barth de conclure en disant que «la suppression la plus rigoureuse de l'histoire, le Non sous lequel tout ce qui est chair vient se placer, la crise absolue que Dieu signifie pour le monde de l'homme, du temps et des choses», «est aussi le fil rouge qui s'étire tout au long de son existence».²⁵

Tout ce que j'ai relevé l'atteste, une radicalité est à l'œuvre au cœur du texte. Elle le tient même de bout en bout. Mais elle n'est en rien la posture qui sous-tend les radicalités religieuses contemporaines. Elle n'est pas radicale en ce qu'on y *maximaliserait* la croyance, mais du fait du *statut* de la croyance, de la foi ou de la posture qui y est engagée, qui est d'un *type* à bien cerner et sur lequel l'humain se méprend toujours à nouveau, pensant qu'y sont en cause des réalités spécifiées, objectives ou objectivables. En stricte corrélation, ce à quoi renvoie cette posture – Dieu – n'est pas du même *type* ou de même *statut* que celui des choses du monde,

22 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 18, je souligne. Et serait-on ici «excusable en disant qu'on] n'a pas encore entendu cette Parole ? Comme si on *pouvait* ne pas l'avoir entendue ! Comme si la "Parole du Christ" était une chose, une nouveauté qu'on puisse "avoir *entendue*" ou "*ne pas avoir entendue*" ! [...] Comme s'il existait quelque chose de plus connu que le Dieu inconnu [...] !» (370). Et, quasiment en forme de résumé au départ du dernier chapitre : «*L'Épître aux Romains* n'offre aucune réalité nouvelle, mais au contraire la vérité ancienne, aucune vérité étrangère, mais la vérité connue, aucune vérité personnelle, mais la vérité universelle» (495). Ou : «Elle dit ce que chacun peut se dire à lui-même. Elle dévoile ce qui toujours et partout est vrai» ; et : «Ce n'est que *symboliquement* qu'elle paraît *sur la scène*, qu'elle fait connaître ses couleurs, qu'elle déploie ses forces [...]. Son acte accompli, elle quitte [le champ de bataille] comme si rien ne s'était passé» (496, je souligne).

23 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 38–39, 45, 47, 79, 82, 95, 97.

24 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 39, 201–202, 222.

25 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 78.

fussent-elles les meilleures, les plus hautes, et *ainsi* non atteintes ou cachées. C'est que tant ce qui ressortit à la *foi* que ce qui relève de ce qui la *fait* et la *tient* sont en jeu au *cœur du monde et de l'humain*, non ailleurs, au cœur des réalités d'ici-bas, humaines, requérant seulement d'être perçues selon un *mode* propre. Il y va d'un *bien-croire* et d'un *bien-poser la question de Dieu*, non d'un croire-*plus*, qui s'opposerait à un croire *faible* ou en compromission *adaptative*, ni d'un Dieu comme *suprême*, qui s'opposerait à un Dieu *partiel* ou aux prétentions *restreintes*. En vocabulaire lévinassien, on pourrait parler d'un *autrement-croire*, qui serait un *autrement que croire au sens courant du terme*, et d'un *autrement-Dieu*, qui serait un *autrement que Dieu au sens courant du terme*.

3 Retour sur la scène juive, ou la manière de la lire

3.1 «Église d'Ésaü» et «Église de Jacob», théologiquement une même Église

Pour aller plus loin, regardons ce que Barth fait de Romains 9 à 11, pages que Paul consacre au destin du judaïsme. Notons d'entrée le titre du chapitre dans lequel Barth place son commentaire : «La détresse de l'Église». ²⁶ Et pourquoi ou en quoi il va être ici question de l'Église l'indique ce qui suit, à l'enseigne de l'intertitre «Solidarité» : «opposée au Message de salut de Jésus-Christ, voici [...] Israël, l'Église», une Église qui est immédiatement dite «monde de la religion». ²⁷

L'Église est ici lue théologiquement, et à l'encontre de ceux qui penseraient qu'elle ne serait pas un problème «grave», mais simplement «un problème saisissable par la science historique», «un problème contingent». Or, «la réalité effective qu'est Israël, la réalité effective qu'est l'Église [remarquons le strict équivalent] constitue, elle-même, écrit Barth, la question» à laquelle «s'adapte exactement» ce qui a été vu dans les chapitres précédents de l'Épître, qu'il explicite et formalise ainsi : «la question de Dieu ne se pose [...] avec une gravité et une acuité réelles que lorsqu'on est arrivé, une fois de plus, heureusement, *au fond de l'impasse de la faiblesse humaine de l'Église*», à quoi est ajoutée la précision, touchant la face positive de ce qui se déploie, que «l'élément nouveau de

²⁶ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 317.

²⁷ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 319.

l'Évangile ne constitue *rien de neuf*, mais est *identique à l'élément très ancien d'Israël*.²⁸

Cernons l'enjeu : « À l'Évangile est opposée l'Église »²⁹ (et selon un « conflit infini »), Église comprise « en tant qu'incarnation de l'ultime possibilité humaine en deçà de l'impossible possibilité de Dieu »,³⁰ un Dieu qui est

pure limite et pur commencement de tout ce que nous sommes, de tout ce que nous avons et de tout ce que nous faisons, s'opposant, dans une différence qualitative infinie, à l'homme et à tout ce qui est humain, jamais, au grand jamais, identique à ce que nous nommons Dieu [...], le « Halte ! » inconditionnel vis-à-vis de toute inquiétude humaine et le « En avant ! » inconditionnel vis-à-vis de toute quiétude humaine.³¹

Dans le commentaire de ces chapitres 9 à 11, Barth joue de manière centrale sur les deux Églises, celle d'Ésaü et celle de Jacob. Y sont respectivement visés Israël et l'Église chrétienne, mais qui, dans la réalité, ne « s'opposent jamais et nulle part, comme *deux Églises distinctes* ». Dit positivement :

L'Église d'Ésaü est, fondamentalement, *la seule Église possible, visible et connue*, englobant totalement Jérusalem, Rome, Wittenberg, Genève [...], et en elle des manquements et des dégénérescences peuvent s'implanter, des réformes et des séparations avoir lieu.³²

Quant à « l'Église de Jacob », elle est

fondamentalement aussi, *l'Église impossible, invisible, inconnue*, l'Église sans étendue ni limitation [...], sans histoire, sans adhésion ni exclusion [...]; en elle résident, à la fois, la grâce gratuite de Dieu, l'appel et l'élection, l'Un et le Tout, le commencement et la fin.

28 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 324, je souligne.

29 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 323.

30 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 319, je souligne. Barth précise ici que l'Église, « c'est le lieu où l'on sait et où l'on a de Dieu toutes sortes de choses, et c'est aussi, conformément à cela, le lieu où l'on ne sait pas et où l'on n'a pas de Dieu toutes sortes de choses ». Sur l'impossible possibilité – possible qu'en Dieu –, cf. « la liberté dans laquelle nous sommes graciés a lieu [...] au-delà de l'humanité qui culmine dans la religion, donc, non comme une *autre possibilité*, mais bien comme *l'impossibilité* qui n'est *possibilité qu'en Dieu* » (225, je souligne).

31 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 318.

32 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 328.

Et, dans le même sens :

Nous parlons de l'Église d'Ésaü parce que *c'est d'elle seule que nous pouvons parler*.^[33] Cependant nous ne pouvons pas parler d'elle *sans songer immédiatement que son thème est l'Église de Jacob*. Ésaü, dans tout ce qu'il a de problématique, vit de Jacob.

Ayant en vue «la totalité de ceux qui sont “issus d'Israël”», Barth précise qu'ils «ne font que représenter tous ceux qui, en priant, élèvent leurs mains vers Dieu»³⁴ et se trouvent par conséquent «sous la crise de cette dualité même de l'Église [...]. Pour eux cette double possibilité existe [...], à savoir que, étant “issus d'Israël”, ils peuvent être [...] l'Église de Jacob ou l'Église d'Ésaü». Notons qu'à cela s'ajoute (comme en inflexion ou en ajout ?) : «en Christ, il devient manifeste que cette possibilité, en Dieu, s'*oriente* : vers l'élection de l'homme et vers son habitation dans la même maison, vers l'édification de l'Église de Jacob».³⁵ Il faudra revenir sur cet «en Christ».

3.2 De la particularité d'Israël

Foncièrement donc – ou : théologiquement –, entre Ésaü et Jacob, une *même* «Église». Il convient quand même – et ce sera pour moi un moment stratégique – de s'expliquer quant à la particularité qui est celle du Juif, ou à ce qui le fait concrètement être ce qu'il est.

Écoutons Barth :

«Qu'est-ce donc que le Juif a encore de particulier ? [Rom 3.1]». D'une façon générale, existe-t-il, à sérieusement parler, quoi que ce soit de particulier, quand toutes choses sont soumises à la colère de Dieu, quand toute particularité, sous forme de délivrance [...], est abolie ? [...]. Existe-t-il [...] une relation entre l'attente de ceux qui, en qualité [...] de héros et de prophètes ou d'hommes de bonne volonté, traversent la scène du temps de notre monde, et le royaume du Dieu qui vient, où toutes choses deviendront nouvelles ?³⁶

Ou encore, transcrivant Paul : «“Quelle valeur a la circoncision ?” Nous répondons : “*Une grande, à tous égards*”». Mais, directement à la suite de cette

33 Analogues : «[...], Église d'Ésaü, *la seule que nous connaissons*» (328, je souligne) et : «pour nous Jacob, *invisible*, s'appelle Ésaü, et seul Ésaü, *invisible*, peut s'appeler, pour nous, Jacob» (334).

34 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 329.

35 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 330.

36 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 79.

reprise, la perspective de fond dans laquelle s'en inscrit la validation s'annonce ainsi, alors selon un angle – de fait, un niveau ? – spécifique, à bien cerner : on aura «reconnu que la concrétisation et que l'humanisation du divin au sein d'une histoire religieuse ou d'une histoire du salut particulière *ne constitue pas une relation à Dieu*, puisque Dieu y est délaissé en tant que Dieu», mais on aura aussi été amené à constater que «*tout ce qui arrive dans le monde connu reçoit son contenu et sa signification du Dieu inconnu*». ³⁷ Le geste à l'œuvre est théologique, et il pose ici un dépassement des particularités au gré d'une radicalisation disqualifiant ou, au moins, reléguant ce qui fait le concret d'une histoire au profit d'une instance dernière disant ce qu'il en est, indirectement mais de toujours et à jamais, de Dieu et de l'humain.

Il n'empêche ! Si l'on revient sur le terrain effectif, du coup inscrit en particularités, on lit :

«*C'est à eux [les Juifs] que furent confiées les manifestations de Dieu*». Si ambiguë et problématique que soit, en tant que position *humaine* [...], la position d'un juste, d'un homme en quête de Dieu et dans l'attente de Dieu, elle est le symptôme clair et nécessaire de ce que *Dieu* veut et fait. ³⁸

D'où, à bien lire et à méditer :

Il y a *dans ce qu'ils ont et dans ce qu'ils gardent un appel, une promesse, une aptitude au symbole*, l'offre d'une *très profonde connaissance* et une *porte ouverte vers elle*. Leur pré-tention à une position particulière [...] n'est pas nécessairement un signe d'arrogance, dans la mesure où des manifestations de Dieu leur sont effectivement confiées.

Et, en conclusion :

Tout ce qu'il y a d'anti-divin dans le cours de l'histoire ne change rien à ce que, *dans ce cours*, existent toujours et partout ces particularités mêmes, ces empreintes mêmes de la révélation, ces occasions mêmes et ces portes ouvertes qui, au regard de Dieu, pourraient [...] conduire à la connaissance.

³⁷ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 80, je souligne ; cf. également : c'est «dans la connaissance de l'éloignement fondamental de Dieu et du monde [qu']apparaît l'unique présence possible de Dieu dans le monde» (90).

³⁸ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 80 – 81, je souligne.

Approfondir, ce sera lire la reprise : «“Qu’est-ce que le Juif a en particulier ?” [...]. Il a une loi, une *empreinte de la révélation*, une expérience vécue [...], un comportement biblique»,³⁹ avec l’explicitation : la loi, c’est

ce qui devrait [...] arracher [...] à toute sentimentalité et à tout romantisme et [...] conduire devant la crevasse ouverte entre le Créateur et la créature [...]. Si cela a lieu, si l’homme [...] se comprend lui-même dans sa *particularité* [...], alors il entend la vérité *dernière*, la vérité de la rédemption et de la réconciliation, la vérité d’au-delà des tombeaux.

Au total : «L’empreinte de la révélation est une réalité *éternelle* là où, en tant qu’*empreinte*, elle n’est rien, et où, en tant que renvoi [Hinweis] à la révélation, elle est tout» (je souligne).

Ce qu’a le Juif «en particulier», c’est la circoncision, où «Dieu est reconnu en tant que Dieu *inconnu*», et si le Juif y reconnaît «la limite entre deux mondes sur laquelle il est placé», alors il pourra [...] s’en «réjouir», Barth précisant que la «réalisation» de cette connaissance, c’est «l’impossible devenant possible»,⁴⁰ en ce qu’elle passe par un «Malgré tout !» rapporté à Dieu seul et comme tel, un Malgré tout «sans motif», sans autre «fondement qu’en lui-même» – ou, ici, qu’«en Dieu» –, hors tout «“Pourquoi ?”»⁴¹

On l’aura compris, est ici en cause «la vérité de *toute* religion», mais «*jamais identique à sa réalité*» (je souligne), et n’y est pas en jeu «une histoire au sein de l’histoire», comme en étant une «partie» ou une «portion».⁴² En outre, l’histoire humaine est, comme telle, non lieu de révélation du meilleur, mais du pire, un pire que, dit au passage, on ne voit pas, et qui a donc aussi besoin d’être manifesté. Ici, la religion qu’est Israël et qu’est l’Église en est le lieu.⁴³ C’est qu’elle est «la *possibilité* avec laquelle *toutes les possibilités humaines* entrent dans la lumière d’une *crise décisive*, la possibilité par laquelle le péché devient *visible* et susceptible d’être *expérimenté*».⁴⁴

Dit en d’autres termes, et resserrant la perspective d’ensemble :

avec le maillon terminal, la chaîne entière se révèle comme une série d’impossibilités. Quand la suprême illusion d’une ambition humaine intervient, le caractère illusoire des

39 Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, 90.

40 Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, 90–91.

41 Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, 92–93.

42 Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, 92.

43 «Il faut [...] rappeler, écrit Barth, que c’est l’Église – [...] pas le monde [...] – qui a crucifié le Christ», *L’Épître aux Romains*, 370.

44 Barth, *L’Épître aux Romains*, 235, je souligne.

ambitions inférieures apparaît aussi [...] au grand jour [...]. La religion devient le point d'interrogation du système culturel humain tout entier.⁴⁵

Ou : «l'homme, en sa qualité d'homme religieux, possède une expérimentation», et «de quoi ? [...] de sa détermination invisible par... le péché».⁴⁶ À quoi s'ajoute que c'est justement «parce que l'Église ne voit pas *cette* détresse *réelle*» – la «sienne» – qu'elle «n'a pas non plus d'espérance réelle».⁴⁷

L'on aura bien sûr compris que, sur cette scène – celle d'Ésaü, que traverse Jacob –, est concerné «*tout homme*» – sous le rapport à Dieu s'entend –, non, précise Barth, l'homme «oriental», «occidental», «allemand», «ni non plus l'homme biblique», «pieux» ou «sage».⁴⁸ Mais l'homme y est en cause en ce qu'«un En avant ! humain, au-delà de la possibilité religieuse, *n'existe pas*».⁴⁹

3.3 Du christologique ici évoqué

Serrons de près ce qu'il en est du christologique qui s'articule à ce qu'on vient de parcourir. On peut lire, d'abord, que «*la fidélité de Dieu* trouve sa confirmation dans ce que, en Jésus, nous rencontrons le Christ», et qu'«*ainsi s'explique* qu'en dépit de toute insuffisance humaine, nous pouvons voir dans les références à Dieu, disséminées dans l'histoire, des possibilités réelles en faveur de Dieu».⁵⁰ Perspective positive, mais dans l'ordre ici investi. Au plan concret, effectif, on lit en effet, à la page suivante, qu'au «sommet» ou au «terme de sa route», Jésus est

45 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 237. On aura pu remarquer que Feuerbach se tient derrière le texte, Feuerbach à qui «Justice est rendue [...], en un sens accru» (229).

46 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 237. Cf. aussi «plus la religion est grande, plus elle est conséquente, et plus profonde est l'ombre de la mort qui s'étend sur l'homme» (Barth ajoute que, dès lors, «on conçoit aisément que la plupart répugnent à s'avancer jusqu'à la lisière *extrême* de cette possibilité, où, à vues humaines, la question ne subsiste plus guère qu'*en tant que question*»).

47 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 331.

48 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 81.

49 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 246, je souligne. Avec la précision, qui suit : la possibilité religieuse «est le dernier En avant ! humainement possible, en ce que, au-dedans de l'humanité et en dehors du Divin, elle indique ce qui constitue l'En dehors de l'humanité, lequel est l'Au-dedans divin. [...] Et éveiller la religion, la maintenir éveillée et la cultiver, mais surtout la réformer [...], c'est là une tâche qui [...], s'il en est une au-dedans de l'humanité, est digne de la sueur des êtres d'élection».

50 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 95.

une donnée purement négative : il n'est nullement un génie, il ne porte nullement en lui des forces psychiques manifestes ou occultes, il n'est nullement un héros, un chef, un poète ou un penseur, [et c'est] dans cette négation [...], en ce qu'il *sacrifie* à un impossible *Plus*, à un invisible *Autre*, toutes les possibilités géniales, psychiques, héroïques [...], toutes les possibilités humaines imaginables, [...] qu'il accomplit les possibilités du développement humain qui tendent au-delà d'elles-mêmes.⁵¹

Se trouve ici repris un motif central en christianisme, celui d'un *accomplissement*, mais il l'est en ce que y est révélé *l'inanité* – et même la *force destructrice* – des possibilités humaines.

Quant à son statut et à sa forme, la vérité ici manifestée est donc négative en termes de réalités humaines et de monde, en ce qu'elle ne constitue « pas une donnée [...] naturelle, ni non plus une donnée d'un rang suprême », ni n'est « accessible par une compréhension directe », pas plus qu'elle n'est déductible ou atteignable selon visée ou idéal. C'est d'ailleurs pourquoi on se trouve hors donnée saisissable, assurée, ou qu'« en Jésus, Dieu [...] se fait connaître comme l'Inconnu » ou « parle comme l'éternel Silencieux ».⁵²

En arrière-plan se tient ainsi rien de moins que le « péché », qui n'est pas ici « une possibilité parmi d'autres », mais « la possibilité de toutes les possibilités humaines comme telles ». De même que la grâce « n'est pas, elle non plus, une possibilité au-dessus ou à côté ou à l'intérieur » d'une possibilité humaine, mais est – c'est ici la face positive – « la possibilité divine de l'homme, se tenant [*bestehende*] au-delà de toutes les possibilités humaines ».⁵³ Or, concrètement, « méconnaissant monstrueusement les distances, [l'homme] se réfère *lui-même* à Celui à qui il est impossible qu'il puisse *lui-même* se référer, parce que Dieu est Dieu et qu'il ne serait plus Dieu si l'homme pouvait ainsi se référer lui-même à Lui ». S'il le faisait, il ferait en effet de Dieu, pour reprendre une veine que j'ai déjà mise en avant, « un objet parmi les objets de son univers ».⁵⁴

51 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 96. Lire aussi : « Golgotha marque [...] la limite de la religion. Dans le Christ, assujetti à la loi et mis à mort, la dernière, la suprême possibilité humaine : la possibilité d'être un homme croyant, un homme pieux, un homme enthousiaste, un homme de prière, a trouvé son *accomplissement* [j'en souligne à nouveau le motif] par sa... suppression totale » (227).

52 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 96–97.

53 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 234, je souligne.

54 Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 236. « Au sein même de la possibilité religieuse, [...] “Dieu” n'entr[e] pas en ligne de compte ; en effet, ce qui pourrait [...] entrer ici en considération sous ce nom, c'est toujours et uniquement un Quelque chose opposé à un autre Quelque chose, un pôle opposé à un autre pôle, une grandeur à côté d'autres grandeurs, [...] mais non [...] le Oui qui réside au-delà du Oui et du Non [...]. Parmi toutes les possibilités existant au sein de l'humanité, la possibilité religieuse [...] est celle qui caractérise le plus le dualisme statué entre transcen-

4 Problématisation

Chez Barth, une radicalité se fait jour. Non en forme de maximalisation, telle qu'on peut la voir à l'œuvre dans les radicalités religieuses contemporaines, je l'ai dit à la fin du point 2, mais touchant le point de basculement ou le type d'articulation – de fait, de non-articulation – entre l'ordre de la vérité de dernière instance, vérité *divine*, et l'ordre du monde, *humain*. Entre ces ordres, il y a en effet, chez Barth, diastase, coupure, de toujours et à jamais. C'est là une force, celle de l'*hétérogénéité*, qui empêche qu'on sanctionne simplement l'ordre des choses du monde. Et c'est une faiblesse et un risque : la faiblesse d'une veine de frappe généralisante⁵⁵ qui empêche de penser un théo-logique *opérant au cœur du monde*⁵⁶ et laisse le monde à son autonomie, non travaillée par ce qui le déborde ; et le risque d'un renvoi à une vérité en forme de pure *proclamation*, dont les effets ne sont pas – ne peuvent être – différenciés, ni problématisés ni pensés au niveau qui est le leur.

On dira que c'est au nom de cette diastase ou coupure que Barth pourrait dénoncer le nazisme. Assurément. Mais il convient de ne jamais oublier qu'avec le nazisme, on aura affaire non à une mauvaise politique, mais à une déviation du politique – Barth le savait⁵⁷ –, un politique aux revendications du coup indues et mortifères auxquelles, effectivement, seul un «Non» est de mise, par-delà toutes les différenciations qu'on pourrait proposer dans des évaluations humainement sensées. Or le politique n'est pas toujours – n'est en principe pas – Hitler, même s'il peut toujours le devenir, comme tout ordre de la création peut se trouver entraîné, pour sa perte, dans la forme de l'anti-Dieu.

La radicalisation à l'œuvre se fait voir quand Barth formule ce qui est consécutif à la révélation que condensent la croix et la résurrection : «désormais [de toujours ?⁵⁸], notre vie, dans toute son amplitude, se *situe* face au contraste

dance et immanence, [...] vérité et réalité, et qui domine inéluctablement cet "Au sein de"». Transcrit : «ici-même le péché "déborde"» (225).

55 C'est selon ce geste que Barth se décale de toute mise en avant tant d'une *proposition énonciative* (orthodoxe ou évangélique) que d'une «vision du monde» à valider (un refus qui marque l'époque et entendait couper avec une manière de faire nouée sur fond de néokantisme).

56 Fût-ce de manière transversale (j'y reviendrai au final).

57 J'en fais état dans «La dialectique de l'Évangile et de l'Église chez Karl Barth. Une surdetermination christologique finalement homogénéisante ?», *Cristianesimo nella storia* 36/2, *Forma evangelii – forma ecclesiae*, éd. Giuseppe Ruggieri (2015) : 403–27, ici 410–15.

58 Le «désormais» renvoie à un *moment historique précis* du monde et du temps, mais y est manifestée une *vérité de toujours*, rapportée à Dieu, ou telle pour Dieu. La question reste à mon sens, ou s'ouvre : que faire de ce moment ? Le tenir comme un «éclair» d'éternité, *toujours*

indissoluble de la vie de Dieu et, pour cette raison, sous le sceau inéluctable de la mort»,⁵⁹ et qu'il ne pourra dès lors que renvoyer à une «élévation» de toujours et d'un tout autre ordre. Par-delà, j'ai assez souligné, dans mes points précédents, qu'il y a, pour Barth, une suspension des réalités du monde, transcendées qu'elles sont de la vérité de Dieu, de même que le temps est suspendu – voire supprimé comme déploiement –, en ce qu'il est transcendé d'un éternel. Parce que «la fin [...] annoncée dans le Nouveau Testament n'est pas un événement temporel [et] est sans rapport avec d'éventuelles catastrophes historiques [...], elle est réellement la *fin*, tellement la fin, que [...] dix-neuf cents ans [...] ne signifient *rien* quant à sa proximité ou à son éloignement». D'où l'interrogation polémique : «Qui nous enjoint d'affaiblir cette vérité éternelle au point d'en faire une réalité temporelle, parce qu'on ne peut parler d'elle que *symboliquement* ?»⁶⁰

Sur le fond, la perspective se reprend ainsi : «Par rapport à *tous* les instants, l'instant *éternel* est incomparable, précisément parce qu'il est le sens transcendant de tous les instants». Il n'empêche que «nous vivons dans la série des instants» et y parlons symboliquement⁶¹ : «ce n'est pas quelque part en dehors de cette série, mais bien au-dedans d'elle [...], que *Jésus* fut le Christ, et qu'une *connaissance* de l'instant éternel existe pour nous». ⁶² L'affirmation «*Jésus* fut le Christ» – où le Jésus est souligné, indiquant qu'on est hors pur télescopage –, de même que celle que nous avons une *connaissance* de l'instant éternel – terme également souligné – méritent à mon sens, exigent même, d'être reprises quant à leur statut, leur teneur et leur portée.

Avant de nous y attaquer, terminons le passage en revue des divers aspects de la radicalisation à l'œuvre. Présente dans le déclassement principal des questions de ce qu'on fait des réalités de la création, elle se retrouve aussi dans le penser de Dieu, ici foncièrement un, voire simple, Barth renvoyant à «l'*unité* de Dieu, [...] celui qui est irrité et [...] celui qui fait miséricorde, [le] *Deus absconditus* et [...] celui qui réveilla Jésus-Christ d'entre les morts, [le] Dieu d'Ésaü et [le] Dieu de Jacob» étant le même.⁶³ Dans le révélé, tout le caché apparaît dévoilé – comme l'indiquaient plusieurs des passages que j'ai donnés en points 2 et 3 –,

surplombant ? Ou *en jouer* comme lieu d'un renvoi à Dieu inscrit et à inscrire toujours à neuf au cœur d'un procès à la fois constant et différencié ?

⁵⁹ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 243.

⁶⁰ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 471, je souligne.

⁶¹ Barth ne nie nullement le passage par un *symboliquement* et un *mythologiquement*, mais n'entend pas entrer dans ce qui s'y déploie et s'y joue.

⁶² Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 469.

⁶³ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 375.

hors tension et hors tout arrière-plan qui serait en excès, donc réservé et inappropriable.⁶⁴ Et l'on a vu tout particulièrement comment cet *un* qu'est Dieu surplombait la scène, pourtant double, d'Ésaü et de Jacob, ou d'Israël et de l'Église chrétienne.

Il y a une radicalisation encore, correspondante, du côté de l'humain. Est en effet concerné, à chaque fois et toujours, *tout homme* – ou l'homme *comme tel* –, même s'il est vu sous un angle particulier, celui que cristallisent la croix et la résurrection de Jésus le Christ ainsi que le Dieu tout autre auquel, ensemble, elles renvoient. Et ce, précisément parce que l'humain est mis en rapport à Dieu *comme tel* – même si Dieu est vu là aussi sous un angle particulier, le même d'ailleurs – en opposition à de l'anti-Dieu lui aussi toujours et partout présent.

En regard, que faire de ce que Barth dit du Juif existant sous la loi, sa force et sa limite (ici, la force et la limite de la religion) ? À une première lecture, on pourrait penser que dans certains de ses énoncés, Barth dépasse le seul renvoi à une *condition* – générale –, où ne serait en cause qu'une donne de *principe*, laissant non touchée – ou réputant indifférente – la *matérialité* des choses. On l'a vu, Barth dit en effet des Juifs (valant ici pour tout humain) qu'ils « gardent un appel, une promesse, une aptitude au symbole, l'offre d'une très profonde connaissance et une porte ouverte vers elle », et que « des manifestations de Dieu leur sont effectivement confiées ». Mais, on l'a également vu, l'empreinte qui en est laissée n'est *rien* en tant qu'empreinte et *tout* quand elle renvoie au Dieu qui déclasse le monde. On en revient donc à la même dialectique, ici d'une « Église d'Ésaü » qui est « la seule Église possible, visible et connue » (l'Église de la *condition* juive [ou humaine et manifestée sur la scène juive] est la seule réelle) et d'une « Église de Jacob » qui est « l'Église impossible, invisible, inconnue, sans étendue ni limitation, sans histoire » (l'Église de la *proclamation* de l'Évangile [ou humaine et en principe de tous, mais historiquement dite sur la scène chrétienne] est ainsi en hors-monde). Dit autrement : l'Église d'Ésaü est la seule effective et concrète ou, pour nous, « Jacob, invisible s'appelle Ésaü » ; et ce n'est qu'en renvoyant au plan autre de Dieu que nous pouvons dire que l'Église d'Ésaü « vit de Jacob ».

Ces deux « Églises » ne sont pas sur le même plan, ou pas du même ordre. Il n'empêche. À mon sens, chacune en son ordre respectif et en sa relation à l'autre – « réciproque », chez Barth, plus décalé ou asymétrique chez moi – doit être *mise en scène* et ce qui s'y passe *raconté*. Pour qu'on n'en reste pas à un Non

⁶⁴ Pour une problématisation et du coup une autre perspective, cf. Jean-Marc Tétaz, « La disparition du Dieu caché. Réflexions sur l'actualité d'un thème luthérien et sur la problématique de ses destins modernes », in *Revisiter la Réforme. Questions intempestives*, eds. Pierre Gisel et Jean-Marc Tétaz (Lyon : Olivétan, 2017), 128 – 64.

radical, d'un côté, et à un Oui tout aussi radical, de l'autre. Mais la radicalisation à l'œuvre chez Barth fait qu'il n'y a pas place pour de la narration concrète, pas plus de l'Église d'Ésaü d'ailleurs (ses effectivités) que de celle de Jacob (comment elle opère, avec ses forces et ses risques propres), pas plus de la *condition humaine* que de *ce qui peut s'y inscrire* évangéliquement et serait à penser, théologiquement.

Or, à mon sens, il convient de ne pas dire le seul *fait* de la loi et le seul *fait* de la religion, comme des principes : s'en disposent en effet des *lieux de pulsions*, et la loi et la religion se donnent selon des déploiements *divers*. Il y a à en montrer les effectivités, à les nommer aussi, tout particulièrement dans notre temps qui les refoule selon des processus de banalisation et de normalisation rampante, un temps où l'Église peut ne plus se sentir «menacée». ⁶⁵

Barth ne s'engage pas dans cette voie, craignant qu'on n'investisse les réalités en jeu – les bonnes comme les mauvaises – pour elles-mêmes. Mais vouloir y échapper conduit, immanquablement me semble-t-il, à renvoyer à un Christ «établi Fils de Dieu» ⁶⁶ ou à un Christ comme «contenu de [la] connaissance» ⁶⁷ à proclamer sans qu'on s'explique plus avant quant à son statut et à sa forme, ni du coup quant à sa teneur et à sa portée. En fin de compte, Christ va être le «chiffre» de la radicalisation à l'œuvre, toute explicitation étant soupçonnée d'en ramener la réalité à l'ordre du monde et de l'humain. C'est qu'il les surplombe plutôt qu'il ne s'y inscrit, une inscription où l'on pourrait raconter, dans le déploiement des temps, ce avec quoi elle est aux prises et ce qui s'y noue à chaque fois. Le Christ toujours à nouveau invoqué paraît ici desserti des effectivités qui en portent la mise en avant, échapper même à l'ordre des figures auquel il ressortit et au geste de configuration qui en sous-tend les instaurations. ⁶⁸

Bultmann disait craindre que Barth n'aboutisse à la répétition d'un «mythe du Christ» («paulinien», et parfois dit «gnostique» ?) ⁶⁹ et craindre en même temps qu'on ne soit conduit à renvoyer aux «années 1 à 30» comme à un «temps de la révélation». Où vérité et histoire seraient plus télescopées qu'en tension ou

⁶⁵ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 347.

⁶⁶ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 38.

⁶⁷ Barth, *L'Épître aux Romains*, 95.

⁶⁸ Elles relèvent de ce que Peter Sloterdijk appelle le théopoétique – ressortissant de fait à un mythopoïétique – qu'il appelle à valoriser, et tout particulièrement à l'encontre du geste barthien, *Faire parler le ciel. De la théopoésie* [2020] (Paris : Payot, 2021) ; sa critique de Barth, parue après notre colloque, est analogue à la mienne, cf. 121, 136–39, 145–49.

⁶⁹ Cf. le point 7 de son texte, «Le "Römerbrief de Barth"», paru en français dans le collectif signalé *supra* n° 7 (et Chalamet, *Théologies dialectiques*, 138–41, 161–62).

en conflit, dirais-je, alors que ces années sont, comme tout temps et tout lieu, une scène où quelque chose peut se passer – ou se passe en vérité – pour ce qu'il en est de l'humain et ce qu'il en est de Dieu, la scène d'une occasion⁷⁰ à leur propos, occasion qu'on peut penser décisive.

Barth assume qu'on parle mythologiquement, y compris du Christ. Mais ce n'est pas alors à entendre en couple d'opposition à de l'historique ou du réel. Le terrain est autre ; on peut le faire voir en transposant la disposition du *tout* est *littera*, mais *tout* peut être saisi en tant que voix du *spiritus*, en : *tout* est mythe, mais *tout* peut être vérité. Il y aura simplement à dire et à penser *en quoi* est vraie telle affirmation posée comme vérité.

5 Faire droit au motif barthien de fond, mais en le reprenant dans une perspective d'ensemble repensée

Ce qui suit vaut esquisse, et au titre d'un correctif. Étaient en cause, dans mes questionnements, le *statut* du « en Christ », ou du « vit de Jacob », et de ce qui y est dit. En l'absence d'un travail à leur propos, les énoncés de foi, notamment christologiques, tendent à s'autonomiser, finissant par se présenter comme affirmations extrinsèques et auto-référenciées. Elles peuvent alors se tenir au départ d'une Église en contre-position, non nécessairement en vue d'un programme politique ou culturel alternatif – avoir lu Barth en préserve –, mais cristallisant un risque sectaire d'assertions qui n'embrayent plus, parce que détachées des tissus où elles prenaient corps. Par-delà la question d'être mythologiques ou non, elles pourront être récupérées en un « positivisme de la révélation », selon l'expression de Dietrich Bonhoeffer dans ses lettres de prison du 5.5 et du 8.6.1944.

J'en ai appelé à narration. Comme Ernst Käsemann demandait au début des années 1950, dans un contexte de discussion analogue, qu'on réfléchisse au *pourquoi* de récits sur Jésus – les évangiles –, après un temps de proclamation postpascale et d'une exaltation en Esprit. À quoi j'ajoute qu'il n'y a pas qu'à raconter Jésus, mais à raconter aussi l'histoire du geste croyant qui l'instaure Christ, ce qui le tient et ce qui l'accompagne. Raconter, pour se donner les moyens de ne pas en rester à une proclamation particulière qui serait vraie en

⁷⁰ J'ai souvent usé du mot occasion dans cet ensemble problématique, mais on a vu que Barth y recourt aussi.

elle-même, ni, du coup, à un fait de foi se présentant comme pur choix, hors texture humaine et en fin de compte arbitraire.

En outre, si on entre dans ces déploiements – où se nouent concrètement les régimes de la «loi» et de la «religion» –, on sera immédiatement, du fait même de raconter, dans un rapport à un *amont* (ce qui va problématiser et donner forme à la «nouveau» : une rupture ? un décalage ? une reprise ? une transgression ? toutes choses qui ne se profilent pas sur un espace «vide»...) et dans un rapport à un *aval* qui en est ouvert (ce qui va là aussi problématiser et donner corps à ce à quoi on est convoqué : la glorification d'un «instant éternel» ? la répétition d'un moment des années 30 – 50 ? la réeffectuation d'un geste au cœur des sociétés et des cultures, du coup en prise sur de l'imaginaire et de l'institutionnel ?). Le christologique en est touché, centralement la portée du «fait-chair», ce qui s'y noue et pour quoi. En tout cela, il convient de sortir de sa «boîte noire» ce qu'il en est de Dieu ou de l'anti-Dieu et de ce qui leur donne forme, selon une poussée de fait en travail au cœur de l'humain et du social,⁷¹ et, corrélé, ce qu'il en est alors de l'humain en ses formes concrètes aussi, et diversifiées.

Entrer dans ces déploiements et les raconter suppose de réinsérer dans une perspective modifiée ce à quoi Barth tient. On sera notamment conduit à renouer avec la distinction, à mon sens irréductible, de l'*économique* et du *théo-logique*. Perspective ancienne, mais que la modernité a mise à mal, une modernité que Barth prolonge ici, voire exacerbe. Sur le fond, l'économique n'est *pas* le théologique, mais le *lieu* où le théologique travaille, et ce lieu est requis : c'est l'espace des consistances et positivités humaines, de ce qui s'y trame et des récits qui s'en donnent. De la positivité donc, à l'encontre de toute évanescence ou dilution, comme de tout déclasserment principal. Et ce qui vaut ici des positivités du monde et du socioculturel (Barth ne travaille pas théologiquement ce qui les traverse, les laissant à leur sécularité) vaut aussi de celles de l'Église (Barth n'en pense pas vraiment l'institutionnalisation, ni les rites ni l'organisation) et des religions (Barth en pense peu les différences et ce qu'elles cristallisent à chaque fois).

Le théo-logique ne fait pas nombre avec l'économique, mais y fait voir une *hétérogénéité* et en répond. C'est pourquoi on parlera d'un *geste*, non d'une sanction apportée à telle réalité – fût-elle supérieure –, et qu'on le dira *transversal*. Il convient de montrer ce geste toujours à nouveau à l'œuvre, de le

71 Je l'ai tenté en m'attachant au motif de la transcendance, sur la scène des réalités humaines, où travaillent du refoulé et des retours de refoulé, comme sur celle des cristallisations religieuses, avec leurs forces, leurs tentations et leurs distorsions spécifiques, dans *Sortir le religieux de sa boîte noire* (Genève : Labor et Fides, 2019).

reprendre pour soi, au cœur du monde. Il relève d'une *instauration* – d'une confession – et est de statut *second*, comme tout ce qui est proprement théologique, mais cet ordre est à penser, avec les risques et chances propres qui y sont liés.

Dire *hétérogénéité* évoque de l'altérité, irréductible au cours des choses du monde. Mais j'en préfère le terme, altérité se faisant, dans son usage, trop immédiatement revendicatrice.⁷² Dit selon un autre champ de références, je suis plus proche d'Emmanuel Levinas que de Martin Buber. Au reste, altérité apparaît d'abord liée à *séparation* et *distance* – ce que Barth souligne de bout en bout –, alors qu'hétérogénéité ouvre plus sur *décalage* et *asymétrie* entre les déploiements du monde et ce qui ici les traverse et les pose, ce sur quoi Barth entre peu, d'où les faiblesses, voire les risques, que j'ai tenté d'indiquer.

72 Cf. sur ce point le dossier consacré à un philosophe s'étant revendiqué de Barth, « Pierre Thévenaz (1913–1955). “Penser sans absolu”. Après le centenaire de sa naissance », *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 146, éds. Pierre Gisel et Jean-Pierre Thévenaz, III-IV (2014) : 225–420 (les 7 propositions de mon texte, « Où en sommes-nous aujourd'hui ? Quel refus de l'absolu pour quelle intrigue au cœur du phénoménal », 301–21, ici 315–20, donnent aussi corps, à leur manière, à ce qu'ouvre ici mon point 5).

Declan Kelly

Existence Between God and the No-God

Abstract: This chapter explores the “Lutheran” character of Karl Barth’s depiction of the three-agent drama as it is unfolded in the second edition of his commentary on Romans. Focussing on the movement from wrath to justification to life in the Spirit, I demonstrate the entanglement and (eschatological) disentanglement of God and the No-God that is portrayed in the commentary, before suggesting some repercussions that this portrayal has for the work of theology.

1 Introduction

When scholars track the forces behind theology’s “apocalyptic turn” in the twentieth century, the publication of the second edition of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans is often pinpointed as instrumental to that turn.¹ Such a judgment is undoubtedly on target. Barth’s fixation on the world-destroying and world-making power of divine grace has evidently proved generative for those who hear in Paul’s gospel the “cosmological apocalyptic” news of God’s redemption of the cosmos from the anti-God powers who have long held it in captivity.²

1 See Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 20–25 for a discussion of the various “apocalyptic” readings of Barth’s commentary.

2 According to Martinus de Boer’s landmark study, “cosmological apocalyptic eschatology” is a pattern of Jewish thought characterised by its understanding of the human plight as slavery to anti-god powers and its depiction of the solution as divine victory in a cosmic battle. See Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul and Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology,” in *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. Louis Martyn*, eds. Marion L. Soards and Joel Marcus (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 358–59. On the presence of the cosmological apocalyptic pattern in Barth’s commentary on Romans, see Bruce L. McCormack, “Longing for a New World: On Socialism, Eschatology and Apocalyptic in Barth’s Early Dialectical Theology,” in *Theologie im Umbruch der Moderne: Karl Barths frühe Dialektische Theologie*, eds. Harald Matern and Georg Pfleiderer (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2014), 145–46. It should be stated that not everyone has detected the presence of this “cosmological apocalyptic” pattern in Barth’s thought. In his telling of the history of the doctrine of justification, for example, Alister McGrath argues that for dialectical theologians such as Barth, “The theological drama which constitutes the Christian faith is [...] held to concern humans and their knowledge of God, rather than the salvation of sinful humans, caught up in the cosmic conflict between God and sin, the world and the devil.” *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 399. McGrath’s criticism repeats that of Gustaf Wingren, who had earlier claimed

Yet for all the influence that Barth's commentary has had on contemporary explorations of Paul's apocalyptic gospel, some of the nuances and peculiarities of its "three-agent" soteriology remain underdeveloped, while some of its more contentious features have been almost entirely overlooked. The argument of this chapter is that the dualism that apocalyptic trades on – in particular, the dualism of God warring against the anti-God powers and, in the death and resurrection of Christ, liberating the cosmos from the tyranny of sin and destruction and death – while a prominent theme in Barth's commentary, takes on a self-consciously Lutheran character, though in a "critical-constructive" mode.³ It does so, I claim, in two respects. First, Barth can be seen to inscribe the three-agent drama within a doctrine of justification by faith, with "justification" referring to the eschatological justification of God that in turn justifies the ungodly and gives the lie to the No-God of this world. It is within this doctrine so understood that the characters in this drama are what they are – and become what they are not. This leads to the second respect in which Barth's is a particularly Lutheran apocalyptic: it is an apocalyptic that, to borrow Luther's admission from one of his Table Talk sessions, does "not know whether God is the devil or the devil is God."⁴ Phrased otherwise, considerable pressure is put on the doctrine of God in Barth's commentary, and it is this pressure that I will seek to accentuate in what follows.

In the first part of the chapter, I will elaborate the "Lutheran" character of Barth's apocalyptic with respect to the topic of the wrath of God. In the second part, I will do so with respect to the righteousness of God in Christ. The third part develops an account of faith as combative protest and lament that looks forward

that while Barth succeeded in turning the liberal theological system on its head, he left its basic two-agent structure intact. See Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), 25–26.

³ Michael Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der 'dialektischen Theologie' Karl Barths: Studien zur Entwicklung der Barthschen Theologie und zur Vorgeschichte der 'Kirchlichen Dogmatik'* (München: Kaiser, 1987), 208. As Beintker rightly notes, the relationship between Barth and Luther is "complex and complicated." It is not the purpose of this chapter to unravel its complexities, but only to draw attention to the fact that Barth's highly influential "apocalypticism" was forged at a time when he confessed himself to be moving "rapidly towards Lutheranism", *Karl Barth – Martin Rade: Ein Briefwechsel*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1981), 154.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Tischreden*. 6 vols., TR 5 (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1912–21), 600.

to what Volker Stümke has termed an “eschatological difference in God.”⁵ Finally, I will offer some reflections on the task of the theology as it is determined by and undertaken within a three-agent conflict of the kind depicted by Barth.

2 Wrath, Unbelief, and the No-God

In beginning with wrath we begin with “the situation in which we find ourselves.”⁶ As Barth remarks in his turn to the “problem of ethics” in chapter 12, the “starting point” for his “much twisted path of thought” has always been “the present situation in all its concreteness.”⁷ And if it is unclear what this present situation is, his parenthetical reference to Romans 1:18–19 removes any doubt: the present situation is a situation “under wrath.”

It is tempting simply to identify the wrath of God with divine judgment, or with the divine No as such. But Barth does not do this, at least not with respect to Romans 1:18. Such an identification overlooks the contingency of wrath, the fact that “It was not inevitable that the wrath of God would reveal itself to those who stood already under [God’s] judgement.”⁸ In other words, if being under wrath is our present situation, it was not necessarily so. “The fact [*Tatsache*] most characteristic [*bezeichnendste*] of our life,” the objective fact from which we cannot escape, according to Barth, is “the judgement under which we stand.”⁹ Though often inaudible amidst what Barth would later describe as the “thunder” of his commentary,¹⁰ this fact is fundamentally, if secretly, positive. Judgement, though it means a “protest [...] against the course of this world,”¹¹ and even “the *end* of history,”¹² “is not annihilation [*Vernichtung*], but establishment or straightening [*Aufrichtung*]”¹³ – one might even substitute in a term particularly favoured in certain apocalyptic circles: rectification.

5 Volker Stümke, “Eschatologische Differenz in Gott? Zum Verhältnis von Barmherzigkeit und Gerechtigkeit Gottes bei Karl Barth und Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt,” in *Zwischen gut und böse: Impulse lutherischer Sozialethik* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 44–68.

6 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 37.

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 427, translation revised.

8 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 47, translation revised.

9 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 42.

10 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols in 13 pts, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), IV/2, x.

11 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 42

12 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 77.

13 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 79, translation revised.

To be under the *wrath* of God, by contrast, is to be in the highly contingent situation wherein God's "judgement now becomes judgement and nothing more."¹⁴ But what effects this new situation, this transformation of judgment from being a saving judgment to judgment as a dark end in itself? It is at this point that the "Lutheranism" of Barth's three-agent drama announces itself, for the thing that effects the transformation of divine judgment into divine wrath is unbelief, the decision for scandal rather than faith. The wrath of God, according to Barth, is God as God relates to unbelief.¹⁵ We might even express this as follows: unbelief is the "creator" of the God of wrath. Barth's later quotation of a passage from Luther's commentary on Galatians demonstrates that this kind of formulation was quite congenial to his thought. Luther writes:

Faith is the creator of the Deity. This does not mean that faith creates something in the eternal divine essence; nevertheless, it creates it in us. Where there is no faith, God is deprived of his honour; He ceases to be accounted among us wise and just and faithful and true and merciful. Where there is no faith, God retains neither His divinity nor His majesty. Therefore, everything hangs upon our faith.¹⁶

It is on this insight, I contend, that so much of Barth's depiction of the three-agent drama of salvation turns.

This "relationship" between God and unbelief does not leave God unscathed. The God of wrath, who is the "creature" of unbelief, is a *contradiction* of God-self. As Barth writes, "the God who, contradicting His own name, affirms the course of this world, is God – God in His wrath."¹⁷ It is at this point that the lines between God and the No-God become blurred, since the description of "God in His wrath" as the one who affirms the course of this world echoes the "definition" of the No-God outlined in the comments on Romans 1:17. There Barth writes:

God – who does not redeem his creation, God – who allows the injustice of humans to run its course, God – who does not confess Himself as God to us, God as the supreme affirma-

¹⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 53.

¹⁵ Though space does not permit a thorough discussion of it at present, Barth's doctrine of predestination is in the background here. As Matthias Gockel demonstrates, "Barth correlates the concepts of predestination, election and reprobation to the duality of faith and unbelief." *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election: A Systematic-Theological Comparison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 105.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works* 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 227.

¹⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 43.

tion of the course of the world and of humans, that is the intolerable, that is the No-God, despite the highest attributes with which we adorn it in the highest emotion.¹⁸

Wrath as a judgment that does not redeem, wrath as an allowance of injustice to run its course, wrath as an affirmation of the world – all this points to the fact that, for Barth, the revelation of wrath and the dominion of “the ‘No-God’ of unbelief” are virtually inextricable. For Barth, talk of the No-God, indeed, the very reality of the so-called “third-agent” is bound up with that wrath of God that “is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1:18).

Barth, hardly surprisingly, is hesitant to name the No-God as God. “The wrath of God,” he contends, “cannot be His last word, the true revelation of Him! ‘Not-God’ cannot seriously be named ‘God.’”¹⁹ And yet, in this world of unfaith, as humans exist *this side* of the resurrection, the identification lingers. To be sure, unbelief cannot rid itself of God. Nevertheless, in a Pauline phrase that appears sometimes menacingly, sometimes hopefully, at various points in Barth’s corpus, “God is not mocked” (Gal 6:7).²⁰ The wrath of God, finally, is not so much God’s punitive or protesting or even secretly saving reaction to the god-manufacturing power of unbelief. It is God’s acceptance of it. The God who wills radically to distinguish Himself from the No-God, and who does so in the resurrection, goes along with human attempts to make a No-God of Him. “The enterprise of setting up the ‘No-God,’” Barth claims, “is avenged by its success.”²¹ In the revelation of the wrath of God there is also encountered a righteousness of God. But this is a righteousness of God “apart from and without Christ.”²²

Two things follow from the connections Barth draws between wrath, God, and unbelief. First, the “cosmological” aspect of salvation is subordinated to what might be termed the “microcosmological” aspect of salvation. The existence of a third agent, in the commentary on Romans, is bound up with the contingent and distorting reality of human unbelief in a way that it is not in, say,

18 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 40, my translation.

19 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 43.

20 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 43. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 560, 590.

21 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 51. And this really is vengeance: “The whole ignominy of the course of the world they must now bear and bemoan and curse as ignominy; and further, in their separation from God they must continue to give it ever new birth. They have wished to experience the known god of this world: well! they have experienced him.”

22 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 43.

Barth's doctrine of nothingness in *Church Dogmatics* III/3.²³ The No-God is a thing that *humans* "set up" and "erect."²⁴ Second, a certain tension is introduced to the being of God, a tension signalled by Barth's notion of wrath as a divine self-contradiction. It is not at all clear that the revelation of wrath (Rom 1:18) is a true self-revelation of God.

3 Righteousness in Christ

If the No-God is God as He appears apart from and without Christ, God in His wrath, God in self-contradiction, God as He is to unbelief, then we might expect the true God, God in Christ, to be just the opposite of this. In one sense that is precisely what Barth seeks to affirm. To say that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God is, for Barth, to say that "In Christ the consistency of God with Himself" – the very consistency which we have seen to be thrown into doubt by the self-contradicting reality of God in His wrath – "is brought to light and honoured."²⁵ What happens in the gospel, in other words, is that "in Christ God speaks as He is, and gives a lie to the No-God."²⁶ The gospel proclaims "the victory of life over death [...] the restoration [*Wiederbringung*] of everything that has been lost,"²⁷ for "God is not death, but the life of the Coming Day."²⁸

Nevertheless, precisely because Barth locates the division between God and the No-God in the miracle of the *resurrection*, this division is for us not a given, protological division, but an eschatological division to be awaited and received, a division that is not the first principle in a dualistic system but a division that God alone can make and reveal *in Christ* and *to faith*. Just for this reason, then, we are thrown back into darkness, and into the either-or of scandal and faith, for as Barth writes, "That the promises of the faithfulness of God have been fulfilled in Jesus the Christ is not, and never will be a self-evident truth, since in Him it appears in its final hiddenness and its most profound secrecy."²⁹ This time, however, the stakes are raised. It is no longer a question of seeing the Judge as Saviour or Rectifier, or of perceiving in God's protest against the present form of the

23 In *Church Dogmatics*, the notion of "the left hand of God" seems to do similar work to the notion of unbelief in the commentary on Romans.

24 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 50–51.

25 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 40.

26 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 40.

27 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 38.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 168.

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 98.

world the hope for redemption. It is too late for that. What can only be done “under wrath” is to accept and affirm *God’s* self-contradiction. This awful acceptance is one aspect of what Barth names faith. “The last inflection [*Beugung*] under God’s wrath is belief in His righteousness.”³⁰ As Barth will later say with respect to the doctrine of predestination, “There is no road to the knowledge of God which does not run along the precipitous edge of this contradiction,” namely, the contradiction that the God naturally named “Despot” is the eternally loving Father.³¹

The precipitous edge of this contradiction is exposed in Barth’s comments on Rom 5:3–5. In faith, he argues, we “are able to say ‘Yes’ to the negations of our life, just as we are often compelled to say ‘No’ to its affirmations.”³² We are able to do so because, by divine miracle, “we have penetrated the reality and meaning of the occasion, because we know what is the origin and end in every present.”³³ But do we really know?, Barth asks. We do not. What we know of tribulation, our possible knowledge of it, is that “It has, first of all, the power of death and the meaning of death.”³⁴ Barth continues: “As a hindrance, destruction and negation of our life, as the terrible enigma of our existence, as the oppressive curse of our creatureliness, as manifestation of divine wrath, as the stroke of fate of the No-God, the god of this world, it seems to oppose us.”³⁵

Note that Barth does not state, as the English translation has him state, that “we suppose” the tribulation “to be sent by the No-God.”³⁶ This suggests that we are somehow mistaken in our supposition, that the No-God is in fact not at work in the tribulation of death, in the manifestation of divine wrath, and in the negation and destruction of our life. But that is to kill the dialectic of the passage. What Barth wants to say is that we know that the tribulation of death is the work of the No-God determined to oppose us. The tribulation really is tribulation. We have not misunderstood it. We really are banished from Christ and handed over

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 77, translation revised.

31 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 350.

32 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155.

33 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155.

34 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155. Death, as Barth explains with reference to verse 12 of chapter 5, is “the affliction [*Bedrängnis*] of all the afflictions in which we stand, the epitome and sum of all the evils, horrors, and riddles of our existence [*Da-Seins und So-Seins*], the reminder that wrath hangs over the man of this world and over this world of man.” (166–67, translation revised).

35 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155–56, translation revised.

36 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 156.

to the god of this world.³⁷ Yet those who dare to know what they do not know, to know what *God* knows, a “transformation” occurs, a seeing of what is “unimaginable” or “impossible to visualise” (*das Unanschauliche*). They see “God’s righteousness in God’s wrath, the Risen One in the crucified, life in death, the ‘Yes’ in the ‘No,’ the exit in the barrier, the coming day of salvation in judgment.”³⁸

It is worth pausing over the notion of God’s righteousness *in* His wrath. For when we do so, we see just how unimaginable this vision is. Recall that wrath is the righteousness of God *apart from and without Christ*; it is the righteousness of God in its confrontation with unbelief; it is, in fact, God in His self-contradiction, God in an activity which could never be a true revelation of Godself, God in the guise of the No-God.³⁹ What can be spied here, I venture, is Barth’s re-working of one of Luther’s more infamous dictums: “God cannot be God unless He first becomes a devil.”⁴⁰

For Luther, the highest degree of faith is exercised when we believe in the God who appears “to be worthy of hatred than of love.”⁴¹ Similarly, for Barth, what we encounter in Christ is the “‘loveless’ love of God,”⁴² the “end of mankind,” the “deepest darkness of human ambiguity.”⁴³ As he writes, “Christ is there, where one knows inconsolably that one is banished from Christ; Christ is never there, where one knows oneself as secure against the tribulation [*Bedrängnis*] of this knowledge.”⁴⁴

It is not for nothing, however, that “Christ is there.” Everything, in fact, hinges on the presence of Christ, the Word of God, to faith. In what is arguably the key theological claim pertaining to the “three-agent” drama in Barth’s commentary, he asserts that “Theodicy concerning evil *and* its removal [*Beseitigung*] is already given by the Word of justification, by which God justifies Himself, and with which He justifies the believer and appoints him the inheritor of His King-

37 As Beintker writes, “The unimaginable becomes vivid without ceasing to be the unimaginable!”, *Die Dialektik in der ‘dialektischen Theologie’ Karl Barths*, 93.

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 156, translation revised.

39 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 43.

40 Martin Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther’s Works 14 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 31.

41 Martin Luther, *Career of a Reformer III: The Bondage of the Will*, ed. Philip S. Watson, trans. Philip S. Watson and Benjamin Drewery, Luther’s Works 33 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 63.

42 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 99.

43 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 97.

44 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 337, my translation.

dom.”⁴⁵ With this invocation of the justifying Word, we strike the nerve of Barth’s soteriology. God is who God is, God is consistent with Godself, God gives a lie to our identification of God with the No-God – and, finally, to God’s own self-contradictory affirmation of this identification – *when* God is present in God’s justifying and transfiguring Word.

4 God’s Combatants

Just because God justifies Godself and us in a promissory and creative Word *to be believed*, Barth insists that the peace of God is not contradicted by tribulations, by the dissolution of the outer human, by the “energy of death,” and by the pressure of enemies.⁴⁶ Such tribulations, as we have observed, provide an occasion for faith. But does this make of faith a kind of quietism, an acceptance of the tribulations that constitute the present form of the world, a resting in God’s loveless love, perhaps even a final “Yes” to the No-God of this world, the world whose supreme law is death?

Barth’s commentary on Romans, I suggest, delivers a more “positive” account of human existence between God and the No-God than initial appearances might suggest. For Barth, as for Paul, Abraham is the model of the true faith. And he is this as the one who, in another phrase borrowed from Luther, “combats God.”⁴⁷

The recognition that tribulation is “God’s way of saving us,” that the “pressure” or “force” under which we stand as “vessels of wrath” is *divine* pressure or force, is precisely the moment of our transformation from passive recipients to combatants. The impossible recognition of God’s action in our being imprisoned and negated generates what Barth calls a “divine counter-force,” a “defiance of God [*Gottestrotz*]” that “seizes the power of the onslaughting evil and turns against the enemy.”⁴⁸

45 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 154.

46 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 154.

47 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155. Cf. Martin Luther, WA 45: “Abraham floats between heaven and earth, fights with God and cuts his heart in two pieces. One Word says: Isaac shall be the seed, the other: he shall die. And yet, hope is there all the time; and no one who is able to stand the blow will ever let it go.” (396).

48 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 157, translation revised. The English translation is cumbersome at this point, with *Gottestrotz* left untranslated. The word here seems to have a positive connotation. Barth certainly uses it positively in a sermon on 5 April 1914, where he describes Jesus as one “full of the peace of God and defiance of God [*voll Gottesfrieden und Gottestrotz*].” — *Predigten 1914*, ed. Jochen Fähler, Gesamtausgabe I.5 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1999),

And so “In the peace of God,” Barth contends, “there is room also for what the religious world calls unbelief.”⁴⁹ This is not the unbelief that generates wrath, but the unbelief of one who laments to the God who forsakes, the unbelief that holds on to the promise that wrath is not the “last word,” the final revelation. To say “Yes” to the negations of life, then, is not incompatible with “sighing and murmuring and weakness,”⁵⁰ with “doubt,” or even with “blasphemy.”⁵¹ In *Church Dogmatics* such modes of existence before God are often – though not always – ruled out of bounds, signs of a humanity still disobedient to the hard will of God.⁵² In the commentary on Romans, they are necessary and fundamental modes of human existence between God and the No-God, of that faith which “does not wait for sight in order that it may believe,” but which nevertheless “presses onwards and leads to sight.”⁵³

This brings us back to the “tension” in the divine being outlined in part 1. Expressed in terms of the doctrine of predestination elaborated in chapters 9–11, there is for Barth a legitimate “protest against the visibility of the God of Esau,” there is a crying for help and a looking “for the revelation of the God of Jacob.”⁵⁴ There is, in short, a looking to the God who, though “the same God [*derselbe Gott*]”, is “wholly different [*ganz anders*]” to the “terrible God [*furchtbare Gott*]” whom we observe and know.⁵⁵ It is this hope for an “es-

159. The word also has a positive meaning in the first edition of Barth’s commentary on Romans (487), where it stands alongside “perseverance” (*Beharrlichkeit*) in that wrestling with the powers of death that leads to victory. Earlier in that same edition (337), Barth speaks positively of a *gottestrotziger Beharrlichkeit* which looks to the future in a restlessness. In the single use of *Gottestrotz* in the *Church Dogmatics*, however, the term has a negative connotation. Barth refers to “*der Gottestrotz des Prometheus*” (“the defiance of Prometheus”), *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1, 443; *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 400.

49 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155.

50 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 155.

51 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 156.

52 Martin Wendte, “Lamentation between Contradiction and Obedience: Hegel and Barth as Diametrically Opposed Brothers in the Spirit of Modernity,” in *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion*, eds. Eva Harasta and Brian Brock (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 77–98.

53 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 154.

54 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 351.

55 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 351–52. Cf. Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. C. Froelich, Luther’s Works 19 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 17: “even though we feel that God is against us and that we have an angry God and that we are sinners who have deserved wrath and damnation, still it is possible for us to pray to God as to our kind and placable Father, for that is the kind of God He always is, and He ought never to be understood in any other way. And so God ought

chatological difference in God,”⁵⁶ for a salvation that is not finally salvation in wrath or even salvation as wrath but salvation *from* wrath that animates faithful existence.

We get a glimpse of this eschatological difference, of this God who is wholly other than God, in the love that is poured into our hearts by the Spirit. Luther’s way out of God’s final identification with the devil is pneumatological: “it is actually the Spirit who enlightens and teaches us in the Word to believe differently.”⁵⁷ Barth’s way out is similarly centred on the eschatological activity of the Spirit: “we love the Judge just because He proves [*erweist*] Himself as Judge to be *not* identical with the god of this world, because as Judge He gives Himself to be known as One who is *wholly* Other to us and to our purpose in life.”⁵⁸ This proof is the Holy Spirit, described by Barth as “the work of God in faith [*das Werk Gottes im Glauben*], the creative and redemptive power of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is nigh at hand,” as “the eternal ‘Yes.’”⁵⁹

Service in “newness of the Spirit” is not bondage. In the newness of the Spirit there is no “‘otherness’ [*Andersheit*] or opposition” between God and humanity.⁶⁰ There is even no fear in this newness of the Spirit, the very fear whose absence, according to Barth, determines that our love is for the No-God. “The Spirit, which we have received and by which we have passed from death to life, brings” the duality of our life to an end.⁶¹ “Now they are Sons, hearing the voice of their Father, forgetting the ‘Otherness’ of God but first forgetting their own ‘otherness.’”⁶²

5 Theology in “the Present Evil Age”

In conclusion, let me suggest three repercussions for the work of theology that follow from the above depiction of existence between God and the No-God.

First, Barth’s commentary on Romans invites us to think of the three-agent drama not in terms of a fixed metaphysic but in terms of a dynamic encounter

to be thought of not according to what we see but according to His promises, in which He has promised that He will be our Father and our God.”

56 Stümke, “Eschatologische Differenz in Gott?”

57 Luther, *Selected Psalms III*, 31.

58 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 156, translation revised.

59 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 157, translation revised.

60 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297.

61 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297.

62 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297.

wherein the three-agents are what they are only in specific relations – relations characterised by either faith or unbelief. The danger in the “cosmological apocalyptic” pattern mentioned in the introduction is that the distinction between God and the No-God appears self-evident, a point of first principles. What Barth’s commentary on Romans relentlessly demonstrates, however, is that the distinction between God and the god(s) of this age is one we are unable to make.⁶³

Second, and following from the first, Barth’s depiction of existence between God and the No-God in his commentary on Romans calls into question the project of unifying the works and attributes of God on this side of the resurrection. There is a tension, perhaps even a conflict, between these works that admits of no easy resolution, one that is only aggravated by Barth’s notion of God’s self-contradiction. In *Church Dogmatics*, that tension appears to have subsided. Yet in his doctrine of nothingness, Barth calls on the theologian to resist the desire for certain unifications. He mentions Peter van Mastricht’s complaint regarding the “feebleness of our understanding” which prevents us from unifying God’s holiness and omnipotence “in face of the existence and presence of nothingness.”⁶⁴ Rather than join van Mastricht in this complaint, Barth suggests that we may not have here something that ought to be unified, and that our incapacity to demonstrate certain unifications may in fact be more in keeping with the reality to be described.⁶⁵

Third, Barth’s depiction of existence between God and the No-God has potential repercussions for our approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. Given the seeming importance of the doctrine of the Trinity to *Church Dogmatics*, it is perhaps surprising that the term “Trinity” makes no appearance in the commentary on Romans.⁶⁶ What significance, if any, might be gleaned from this conspicuous absence? Might this absence even recommend itself in some way?⁶⁷

63 Luther’s commentary on Galatians is an exercise in striving to learn this distinction.

64 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 394.

65 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, 394.

66 Despite this lack of explicit reference to the Trinity, Bruce McCormack notes that “the doctrine of revelation as it was set forth in *Romans II* was already *functionally* Trinitarian.” McCormack sums up this functionally Trinitarian doctrine of revelation as follows: “God reveals Himself in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 262.

67 I ask this question aware that Barth’s *Römerbrief*, for all its idiosyncrasy, is a commentary on the letter to the Romans and not an experiment in systematic theology, just as Paul’s letter to the Romans is a letter and not a system of doctrine. As Matthias Gockel observes, however, Barth’s commentary “is structured as a theological treatise that explores major themes of the Christian

Oswald Bayer's apocalyptic interpretation of Luther's theology offers a possible path forward, one which Bayer thinks is largely inimical to the project of *Church Dogmatics*, but one which could, I venture, be aligned with the commentary on Romans.

According to Bayer, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a "dogmatic proposition" with which the theologian can begin and out of which she can then unfold all the other dogmatic themes.⁶⁸ Such a procedure assumes a "bird's-eye view" of the plan of salvation that is grasped by the human knower. Moreover, in Bayer's view, "Theologians who presuppose the triune nature of God attribute the dark side of God to the person of the Father and speak of the wrath of God as the other side of his love."⁶⁹ But the effect of this is to render "impotent" what ought to be identified as "demonic." In the end, such programmatic trinitarianism is in Bayer's view a speculative form of theologising "that ignores time and situation,"⁷⁰ and one that "ignores or minimizes the problem of unfaith."⁷¹

What Bayer recommends is that the Trinity be a doctrine that emerges within the doctrine of creation, and particularly within the doctrine of reconciliation as the "overthrow" within God that effects the movement from wrath to grace and death to life.⁷² Most properly, however, teaching about the Trinity should be among those last things dealt with by theologians, not as addendum but as doxology. Since the triune life of God is pure gospel, pure grace, it is eschatological in the strictest sense.

There are elements ingredient in Bayer's argument with which it is difficult to align Barth. Bayer's sharp distinction between law and gospel, which informs many of his claims, sits uneasily even with the early Barth. Further, and no doubt related, Bayer's recommendation of a distinction between "general teaching about God" and teaching about the Trinity might appear suspicious to anyone wishing to say "No" to natural theology.⁷³

In what sense, if any, then, might Bayer find Barth's commentary on Romans to be a travelling companion? Let me suggest three. First, Barth's claim to always

faith, following the order of Paul's letter." *Barth and Schleiermacher on the Doctrine of Election*, 104.

⁶⁸ Whether this is in fact the procedure of the *Church Dogmatics* is open to question. As Barth himself states in *Church Dogmatics*: "the impression can and must be destroyed that at every point we have to do with a system of trinitarian doctrine," I/2, 879.

⁶⁹ Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 336.

⁷⁰ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 335.

⁷¹ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 335.

⁷² Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 334.

⁷³ Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 337–38.

begin with the present situation, that is, with life “under wrath,” comports with Bayer’s desire to take seriously time and situation, and also unbelief. Indeed, one might even propose that Barth’s notion of wrath as the righteousness of God apart from and outside of Christ could, at a stretch, develop into “general teaching about God.” Second, a certain progression can be detected in Barth’s commentary. We move from the wrath of God to the loveless love of God in Christ to the gift of the Spirit and to the invocation of God as Father. Here, I think, Barth is in agreement with Bayer that one cannot assume “that it is clear that God is always the same”⁷⁴ and that one cannot proceed as if one knows that the God who allows me to sink into hell is the triune God. Indeed, the “Father,” in Barth’s commentary, is never the subject of any of the verbs Bayer would associate with the death-dealing function of the law. This is surely not unimportant. Third, and finally, Barth’s inscription of the three-agent drama within the doctrine of God’s promissory Word of justification connects speech about and to the Trinity to the ongoing battle and to our present existence between God and the No-God. As Bayer writes, “Since the triune God will be visible for everyone and will be beyond dispute only at the eschaton, we speak in the here and now about the Trinity in a way that is always linked to songs of lament and in a protest against death.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Barth states:

I must live in the darkness, but not now without the reflection of light uncreated; God’s prisoner, but as such His freedman; His slave, but as such His Son; mourning and yet blessed. I must still cry unto Him who confronts me only as unknown and undiscoverable, as Enemy and Vanquisher and Judge and Death – crying to Him out of deep distress and in great fear, but nevertheless, crying to Him, *Abba! Father!*⁷⁶

Barth asks if in this crying is finally that human action which is pronounced righteous, that concrete behaviour which is not dissolved, that joining together of religion and faith. Who could dare make such an assertion, Barth responds. And yet his next word is: who can dare deny it?

74 Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 337.

75 Bayer, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 336.

76 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 297–98, translation revised.

Cambria Janae Kaltwasser

At the “Zero-Point” of Faith: The Clash of Old Man and New in the *Römerbrief* and Barth’s Later Doctrine of Sanctification

Abstract: This article considers the light shed by Barth’s 1922 *Römerbrief* upon his doctrine of sanctification in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2. Barth’s description of the radical diastasis between the old man and the new in 1922 bears striking similarity to his treatment of conversion in 1955, each replete with metaphors of warfare. In both, Barth’s categorical treatment of old man and new throws every positive descriptor of the Christian life into question. In each case, however, this diastasis is accompanied by Barth’s insistence that these two determinations are ordered irreversibly toward the new. This article argues that these two themes – diastasis and ordering – have conflicting consequences for Christian ethics. Whereas the former tends to void the Christian life of any concrete marks, the latter supplies it with material norms.

1 Introduction

This article considers the light shed by Barth’s 1922 *Römerbrief* upon his doctrine of sanctification in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2. Barth’s description of the radical diastasis between the old man and the new in 1922 bears striking similarity to his treatment of conversion in 1955, each replete with metaphors of warfare. In both, Barth’s categorical treatment of old man and new throws every positive descriptor of the Christian life into question. In each case, however, this diastasis is accompanied by Barth’s insistence that these two determinations are ordered irreversibly toward the new. I argue that these two themes – diastasis and ordering – have conflicting consequences for Christian ethics. Whereas the former tends to void the Christian life of any concrete marks, the latter supplies it with material norms. My argument unfolds in three sections: 1) The categorical treatment of old man and new man in Barth’s second *Römerbrief* and in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 2) Barth’s subordination of old to new man in these texts, and 3) the differing visions of the Christian life that result from these theological moves.

2 Barth's Categorical Treatment of Old Man and New

If the problem of Barth's second Romans commentary can be summarized, "How [can] God be known by human beings without ceasing to be God?"¹ then the problem broached at the start of its fifth chapter² might be summed up with the question, "How can human beings recognize themselves as subjects of faith in God without making God a predicate of their own histories?" An ordinary treatment of the believer's new life in Christ might describe the effects of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, here oriented perhaps to Paul's emphasis on endurance and hope in adversity,³ but Barth's concern is precisely to deny the identity of God's action with any human reality.⁴ To identify the two is to replace God's resurrection power with mere human religiosity. It is to underestimate the power of Sin and Death that envelopes all human striving alike. Consequently, Barth will ascribe the Christian a transformed existence only in a highly dialectical fashion. Throughout *Romans II*, Barth's method of ascribing newness of life to the Christian is the juxtaposition of two contradictory realities, old man and new.

Barth draws these categories from "the old man" crucified with Christ according to Romans 6:6, associating this "old man" with the "one man," Adam, of Romans 5:12–21, and treating him as an archetype of the sinful human being.⁵ But this sinful being is not simply one of multiple determinations of our existence. He is identical with the human "ego" as such, and all our concerns and judgments fall under his sway. Even the highest achievements of human discernment are no more than "judgments on the old man by the old man."⁶

With God's judgment falling upon all human action *qua human*, the question arises, how do we come to know ourselves as the "old man," trapped within this "closed circle," at all?⁷ How, indeed, may we know ourselves as made new?

1 Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 207.

2 The first subsection of the chapter is entitled "The New Man." Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 149.

3 Romans 5:3–5, NRSV.

4 "[T]his identification must always be shattered by the recognition that man is not God." Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

5 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 197.

6 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 198.

7 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 198.

Barth answers both questions by arguing that the new man is the presumed vantage point from which we see the old man. This vantage point arises from Christ’s crucifixion, in which we see “the new man *invisibly* contrasted with the old.”⁸ In Christ’s death the believer sees the dissolution of her old self from “the invisible point x ,” that is, the new man. In other words, it is not that she observes a transformation in herself. Rather, in witnessing God’s judgment upon her old self in the cross of Christ, “a gulf is created by which I am distinguished from that old man, and the mysterious possibility emerges of my regarding myself as an object not identical with myself.”⁹ The “new man” is a necessary presupposition, a possibility that must be believed by faith although not seen.

This exposition of old and new man in connection with Romans 6:6 makes sense of Barth’s repeated insistence that the old man is the “known man,” whereas our new life is “invisible.”¹⁰ The life of the new man is *not yet* my life. Yet, *it is* mine by faith. One of Barth’s chosen metaphors to express the position of the Christian in this life is the center point between two bows of a hyperbola:

He is the zero-point between two branches of a hyperbola stretching to infinity; and being this, he is, in unimaginable fashion, both end and beginning. The new subject, being that which is radically and absolutely ‘other,’ must therefore be contrasted with what I am; it is in fact, what I am not. Nevertheless, I am this new subject; because, since faith is the predicate, an identity is established between me and it.¹¹

Faith is the ending point and the beginning point, the demolition of the old man and the creation of the new. The mathematical metaphor that Barth employs rules out the possibility of any overlap between old and new man. The believer stands at the zero-point between the two realities. Since I cannot claim to be outwardly identical with the new man, it is by faith and only by faith that I grasp the new reality of who I am. According to Barth, “We can only BELIEVE in what is new, and, moreover, our capacity reaches no further than to believing that we do believe. The point where faith and unbelief part company can be defined neither psychologically nor historically.”¹² Barth’s aim is to separate the life of the renewed human being from the visible existence of the man of sin so that no

⁸ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 198, emphasis mine.

⁹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 199.

¹⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 150, 149. See also 164–65: “As the old man, he is what he ‘is,’ the man ‘we’ know, who is under the wrath of God: as the new man, he is what he is not, the man ‘we’ do not know, who is righteous before God.”

¹¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 149.

¹² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 150.

human efforts at righteousness may be confused with God's will in the world. God's judgment falls on all human action *qua human*. It follows that there can be no concrete modifiers of this new life. Any modifiers would themselves be descriptions of human and not divine action: "Faith and its power is invisible and nonhistorical."¹³

Barth's categorical treatment of old and new man finds support in Pauline apocalyptic, according to which Sin is not confined to discreet human actions. Sin and Death are powers that stand over us, conscripting us into their war.¹⁴ Barth depicts the pull on the believer's life by Adam and by Christ as a life-or-death struggle in which I am called by God to take up arms against my old life of sin, against myself.¹⁵ Similarly, Paul exhorts the believer, "No longer present your members to Sin as weapons of wickedness, but [...] present your members to God as weapons of righteousness."¹⁶ Paul describes human history in terms of two epochs, one inaugurated by Adam and characterized by the reign of Sin and Death; the other inaugurated by Christ and characterized by freedom from Death. Barth is merely sticking to the Pauline script when he insists, "The man under grace is engaged unconditionally in a conflict. This conflict is a war of life and death, a war in which there can be no armistice, no agreement – and no peace."¹⁷

Barth takes interpretive license, however, by associating our visible, psychological, and moral lives strictly with the old man, while consigning the new man to what is unseen. It may be more faithful to Paul to speak of an "overlap" between epochs that includes an "eschatological fulfillment already experienced" as a foretaste of the fulfillment yet to come.¹⁸ Certainly, Paul does not relegate all visible signs of new life to the future. In Romans 5, for instance, he lifts up the virtues of endurance, character, and hope.¹⁹ For Barth in *Romans II*, however, the absolute conflict between the old man and the new rules out the possibility of any imperfect manifestation of new life existing alongside the man of sin.

Three decades later, as Barth penned the lectures that would comprise his doctrine of sanctification, he had gained a new resolve to do justice to the positive significance of human agency under grace, yet his concern to describe old

13 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 152.

14 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38 A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 288.

15 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 208.

16 Romans 6:16, NRSV, trans. revised.

17 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 225.

18 Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 250, 252.

19 Romans 5:3–5.

and new man as mutually exclusive realities remained unchanged. This time, rather than treating the human believer as a pivot-point between two contrasting realities as in the *Römerbrief*, Barth speaks of the Christian as simultaneously wholly determined by sin and wholly determined by grace.²⁰ This move allows Barth to speak more favorably of a real transformation of the Christian under the power of grace. However, when it comes to identifying that transformation through visible marks, Barth remains nearly as reticent in his sixties as his younger self. In his section “The Awakening to Conversion,” Barth’s account of sanctification is characterized by its juxtaposition of two opposing realities – the slothful disobedience to God that still clings to all of our actions and the liberating grace of God that already enables us to follow and obey.

The sub-section culminates in a metaphor reminiscent of chapters 5–6 of Barth’s *Römerbrief*, that of a conflict between two total and mutually exclusive determinations of the human being. According to Barth, conversion consists in a “warfare [...] a quarrel, or falling-out.”²¹ The man of sin and the new man are each totalizing characterizations of the individual believer: “In the twofold determination of the man engaged in conversion we have to do with two total men who cannot be united but are necessarily in extreme contradiction.”²² Consequently “there is no present in which we can look beyond this *simul*, in which the man engaged in conversion is not wholly under the power of sin and wholly under that of grace.”²³ The categorical nature of old man and new has not changed from Barth’s second Romans commentary. What has changed is that rather than depicting the Christian “on the threshold,”²⁴ or suspended between two branches of a hyperbola, Barth now treats these two determinations as paradoxically mutually exclusive realities that exist simultaneously. In this way, Barth recognizes the eschatological tension between the “already” and the “not yet” of our new life in Christ.

²⁰ George Hunsinger argues convincingly that Barth’s doctrine of sanctification assimilates John Calvin’s insight regarding the simultaneity of justification and sanctification into Luther’s categorical framework *simul iustus et peccator*. George Hunsinger, “A Tale of Two Simultaneities: Justification and Sanctification in Calvin and Barth,” in *Conversing with Barth*, eds. John C. McDowell and Mike Higton, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 76.

²¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, vol. IV/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), 570.

²² Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 571.

²³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 573.

²⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 180.

3 The Triumph of the New Man

Up to now I have focused on Barth's categorical – all or nothing – treatment of old and new man, emphasizing the perpetuity of the conflict as Barth describes it already in his 1922 *Römerbrief* and still in his doctrine of sanctification in 1955. Barth insists that in this life we are never permitted to look beyond these two totalizing realities or to imagine that we have lessened the threat of the old man or strengthened the capacity of the new. And yet, both texts also argue adamantly, in line with Paul himself, that we must not treat humanity in Adam and humanity in Christ as though they were evenly matched opponents.²⁵ This truth is vital to Barth's developing gospel-law thesis, which will continue to define the theology of the *Church Dogmatics* to the end: It is only in light of the goodness of the gospel that we are enabled to recognize our failure to fulfill the law. It is only in light of God's graciousness to us that we see the wrath of God we have been spared.²⁶

In the *Römerbrief*, Barth is clear that the death of the old man and the new life in Christ “are not of equal weight,” nor is the believer caught in “an ever-recurring cycle of sin and righteousness, death and life.”²⁷ He depicts the Christian as standing “hopefully on the threshold” of the new world,²⁸ able to survey the old man whom he still is as well as the new man he is already only by faith. From this vantage the Christian anticipates the dissolution of the old for the sake of the new. The believer is caught up in a movement: “The dualism of Adam and Christ, between the old and the new [...] exists only in so far as it dissolves itself. It is a dualism of one movement [...] of one road from here to there.”²⁹ Nor is the old man an object of faith. Only Christ is that. Therefore, the obligation of the Christian believer is to look forward with hope to the “dissolution of the apparent symmetry of these contrasts.”³⁰

In an analogous way, in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, Barth's *simul* of old man and new heightens the conflict of the Christian life, but its import is not to suggest a

25 We need look no further than the latter half of Romans 5, where Paul treats the epochal figures of Adam and Christ asymmetrically, arguing that the epoch of Sin and Death that resulted from Adam's sin has been stemmed by the obedience of Christ, whose free gift of righteousness has overcome it. Romans 5:15–17.

26 See Barth, “Gospel and Law,” in *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 71–100.

27 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 163–64.

28 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 180.

29 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 176–77.

30 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 178.

perpetuity of struggle but precisely to drive home the unsustainability of the current arrangement:

If it is true that we can never at any time see beyond this *simul*, it is equally true that this *simul*, in virtue of its dynamic as a moment in the history of God with man and man with God, points beyond itself, impelling to the only possible decision between the two total determinations which now coincide in man.³¹

It is as though one stood on the edge of precipice where the ground has begun to crumble underneath one’s feet. As *all* of oneself is under threat, security is an *all-or-nothing* (categorical) event in which one’s fate is imminent. Because of Christ’s once-for-all atonement, our future is secure in the hands of our savior, even if, existentially, we are still in the process of being snatched from the edge: the rocks will fall away, and we will remain in our Savior’s hands.

4 Envisioning the Christian Life

As I have shown, the aim of Barth’s categorical treatment of the Christian life under the old man and the new man is to announce how knowledge of God takes place in faith without God becoming identified with any human given. One question that ought to be asked is how successfully it does so. In this case, what kind of knowledge do we gain about the new man in Christ? We will see that Barth’s depiction of the old and new man in totalizing terms leads him to level human actions such that the contours of the Christian life are made ambiguous. By contrast, his emphasis on the Christians’ irreversible movement from old man to new initiates a critique against such a leveling that furnishes soil that is rife for a more robust discussion of the marks of faith. In what follows I will trace these two themes in *Romans* II and in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2: 1) the ambiguity of good human action, and 2) the identifying marks of the Christian life.

4.1 Theme 1: The Ambiguity of Good Human Action

In his commentary on *Romans* 12, under a section entitled “The Problem of Ethics,” Barth offers a characteristically modest statement as to the significance of human action in light of God’s work:

³¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 573.

There is no human action which is not in itself fashioned according to the form of this world; and yet there are actions which seem almost to bear in themselves the mark of the divine protest against the great error. There is no human action which is in itself fashioned according to the transformation of this world; but there are actions which seem so transparent that the light of the coming Day is almost visible in them. Human conduct is therefore in itself only [...] a parable, a token of the action of God.³²

Between divine action and human response, Barth interposes a series of buffers: Human action itself is always part of the world and thus, subject to condemnation. Some actions, however, bear a mark of the divine protest, or they “almost” do, or they “seem” almost to do. Furthermore, note that the sign that they bear is itself negative in content. It is a mark of God’s protest against the world of which the actions themselves are an explicit part.

This passage is representative of Barth’s habit of qualifying whatever positive statements he makes about the capacity of human action to faithfully respond to God. In both texts under consideration, Barth limits the relationship between divine and human agency in three ways: 1) He makes the relationship between human action and God’s action indirect, by designating the former as witness. 2) He makes human witness to God’s work occasionalist by asserting the prerogative of God to decide where and when such witness takes place independent of any qualities of the work itself. 3) With regard to faithful witness, Barth picks out only those actions characterized by humility and claimlessness. In what follows I give an example of each case from each text.

4.1.1 Good Human Action as Witness

A distinctive theme of Barth’s ethics is that human beings are not charged to secure the good by their faithful actions, but only to witness to the good secured apart from them in Jesus Christ.³³ As we saw in the quote above, in the *Römerbrief*, the Christian’s response to God has a totally different status than God’s own work. While human action cannot be considered a continuation of God’s will, there is at least a hope that it might become a “parable,” a “token” of God’s action, though this cannot be more than a hope.

³² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434–35.

³³ In what is perhaps the most comprehensive work on Barth’s ethics to date, Gerald McKenny treats Barth’s ethical thought as the elucidation of this surprising claim. *The Analogy of Grace in Karl Barth’s Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

In his later doctrine of sanctification, in his section on the “Praise of Works,” Barth states that, in God’s power, our good works outwardly witness to God.³⁴ The sin that inevitably clings to all of our actions, does not disqualify them as potential witnesses to God.³⁵ However, Barth insists that that witness is available to the eyes of faith alone.³⁶ So far, then, there are human actions that witness to God’s action, but there is no action, however good, that provides an inviolable witness to God’s action.

4.1.2 Good Human Action as that Determined Such by God

Not only do good actions fail to provide a witness to God’s work apart from the eyes of faith, Barth goes further along these lines, by insisting that whether any action does or does not correspond to God’s own work is itself a work of God and not of the Christian. In chapter 12 of the *Römerbrief*, Barth states that “Whether our actions do in fact serve His glory must be left entirely to His decision [...] [I]t is He who will assign to them their value.”³⁷ Even where he gives more specifics under the headings of “positive” and “negative” possibilities, he characterizes these as mere probabilities, not themselves without ambiguity:

It may seem to us more probable, that we should attain to that ‘sacrifice,’ that demonstration to the honour of God, within the framework of a particular series of concrete actions: more probable, that is to say, that we should be able to fulfill the four commandments written on the first ‘Table,’ if we do so having first fulfilled the commandments written on the second ‘Table.’ But when we say ‘easier,’ ‘more closely,’ ‘more probably,’ we mean that the ethical necessity even of these particular kinds of human conduct does not lie in their ‘matter’ – for materially they belong to *this world* – but their ‘form,’ that is to say in their Primal Origin, in the Oneness of the subject of the action. The possibility that from time to time God may be honoured in concrete human behavior which contradicts the commandments of the second Table must therefore be left open.³⁸

Barth’s distinction between form and matter here is illuminating. An action’s matter is the characteristics and qualities of the action itself. These all fall under God’s No. An action’s form is its relationship to God’s own work, a relationship over which the believer has no control. Barth’s conviction in the *Römer-*

³⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 586.

³⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 589.

³⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 587.

³⁷ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

³⁸ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 451.

brief is that it is God and God alone who makes our actions witness to his actions, irrespective of their characteristics or content.

In his doctrine of sanctification of *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, Barth qualifies the possibility of a human work serving as witness to God along similar lines. It is not within our power to make our work attest to God: “Even the best man cannot place himself and his work in the service of the work of God, or make his work a declaration of God’s work and therefore a good work. When this takes place, it is obviously because God’s own work assumes a special form.”³⁹ Therefore, works that praise God are distinct solely in virtue of God’s action of sanctifying them “irrespective of what they might be apart from this relationship in the eyes of men and above all *in the eyes of God*, and quite irrespective of the fact that even as good works they are full of transgression.”⁴⁰ Finally, the Christian “cannot assume that any specific work really takes place in this correspondence, in the light and power of the divine work, and therefore that it is well done.”⁴¹ Above all, good work is picked out by Barth by its relationship to the sovereign and unintuitable action of God, and not in terms of its own marks or qualities.⁴²

4.1.3 Good Human Action as Action Done in Humility

Barth does not deprive us of every concrete description of faithful Christian action. This is not the case in his ethical sections, nor is it the case in either his 1922 *Römerbrief* or the fourth volume of his dogmatics. He writes that human action cannot be considered “a night which makes all things dark.”⁴³ It is noteworthy, however, that as he turns to positive descriptions of a life lived in response to the gospel, again and again he reaches for self-effacing dispositions and actions: for repentance, selflessness, and humility. So, in *Romans* chapter 12, he writes that our actions

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 593.

⁴⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 593, emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 594.

⁴² At times, Barth can be interpreted as claiming nothing more than that human discernment is not absolute and must await the divine Judge who alone has authority to pronounce as to the goodness of our actions. Epistemic humility about the goodness of our deeds is entirely appropriate and not the issue under consideration here. Rather, I am concerned with statements in which Barth clearly distinguishes good action from its material characteristics, which lead automatically to ambiguity regarding the outward marks of the Christian life.

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 586.

are legitimately bound to [God’s honour] and properly ‘good,’ only when they constitute a veritable abandonment by men of their power and their right, and thereby proclaim the mercy and freedom of God; only when they are all of them, appeals to Him to accept them or to reject them, claiming therefore to be no more than parables and tokens; only when it is left entirely to Him to pronounce upon their meaning and their value.⁴⁴

Here, Barth makes a connection between God’s absolute prerogative to determine an action’s worth and the radical claimlessness that marks good human action.

In *Church Dogmatics* IV, Barth likewise appears to give humility a status not shared by any other Christian disposition. If a person acts in humility, “this is a sure criterion – though not a guarantee – that what he does is well done.”⁴⁵ In short, Barth is willing to ascribe provisional criteria to good human action – above all, that that action is done in humility.

Of course, there is no reason that actions done in humility should be any less susceptible to the judgment of God that falls on all human action *qua human*. Could not Barth have just as easily lifted up courage or love as the characteristic of those acts more probable to be pronounced good? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, for Barth, humility takes pride of place because it is a quality of human action that seems less susceptible to the presumptions that he fears would accompany acknowledgment of the other Christian virtues. Humility is the virtue that seems least virtue-like to Barth.

Overall, there emerges in each of these writings a strong reticence to speak unequivocally about the marks of the Christian life. The value of an action is defined in terms of its witness, a possibility, moreover, that relies entirely on God’s in-the-moment pronouncement as to its goodness. As I suggested above, these moves aim to keep God from being reduced to a predicate of the human subject. Barth’s God is *never* beholden to recognize the goodness of the actions of God’s children.

The upshot of this approach to redeemed human agency is meant to be its prophetic toppling of human idolatries of all sorts. Where norms are not specified, they cannot calcify into idols. Where virtues are not identified, no presumptions as to God’s action and agency can arise in the believer. No human program can co-opt God. The question remains, however, whether prophetic critique can get off the ground apart from a material norm that goes beyond humility and selflessness. If human action *qua human* falls under the judgment of God, what kind of human action are we called to?

⁴⁴ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 594.

Perhaps, Barth asks us to remain radically open as we wait upon those moments in which God peels away the veil and enables us to differentiate the wheat from the tares,⁴⁶ so directing us where to go. Would not these in-the-moment directives make appeal to a material norm, however – the selflessness of Christ, for instance? If they did not. If they were merely directives, how would we know if they were directives from God or from a devil?

4.2 Theme 2: The Triumph of the New Man

As a matter of fact, Barth gives us more than just this skeptical strain regarding faithful human action. As we have seen, here and there in the *Römerbrief* and in a more developed way in *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, Barth presents a second thread regarding the relationship between old man and new, where perpetual conflict is set aside and the old world is seen as fleeing shadows in the light of God's new day. In this vein, Barth speaks of God's ordering law to gospel, no to yes, and Adam himself to Christ. In these passages, we find Barth making concrete claims about the nature of justice and even moral psychology that are ripe soil for a more robust description of the Christian life.

Although in the section "The Awakening to Conversion" Barth handles the Christian life in the starkest of terms, as characterized by two totalizing and mutually exclusive determinations, Barth follows this claim with a much longer small-print argument as to why the two determinations must be treated teleologically, never for one moment as if they could live together equipoised.

In this section, Barth offers a sustained critique of theologies that treat God's law as an inscrutable principle, independent of God's covenantal love. Barth suggests that treating old man and new with equal realism is akin to treating judgment and mercy like the pronouncements of two separate gods. In fact, for Barth, God's No upon sin has its *force* from God's first covenantal Yes and can only be heard in that connection. Here, I will quote him at length:

If in this basis and origin the order were different, and the truth revealed to man were that man is for God, and therefore God for man, the truth would not make us free. It would simply be a demand that man should be what he is not free to be. It would then have nothing to do with *vivificatio*. For how can the man who is against God become a new man merely by being asked to make a decision which is quite alien to him and to be for God? But it could also have nothing to do with *mortificatio*. It might startle and frighten man, but it

⁴⁶ See Barth's extended metaphor for Christian discernment: *The Epistle to the Romans*, 225–28.

could not and would not in any way raise him out of his existence as a sinner, or even touch this existence. It would simply be an abstract law—a law without any locus in a life fulfilling and embodying it, but merely advancing the arid claim that it is the law of God, and that as such it has the authority and right to demand that man should be for God, and thus fulfil the condition under which God will also be for him. This abstract law has never yet led a man to conversion, even by killing him, let alone by making him alive. It has no power to do either. For it is not the living God, nor His quickening Spirit, who places man under this law.⁴⁷

The bare demand that one ought to love God, the bare knowledge of one’s existence having offended this God, cannot fund the Christian life. Why is this so? According to Barth, such a command would be “abstract” in the sense of having no locus, no *Sitz* in the life of the one to whom it is directed. There is an implied challenge to the very authority of such an abstract law, a law which makes no inward appeal, “but merely advanc[es] the arid [*dürren*] claim that it is the law of God.” Such a claim is barren, Barth seems to imply, for there is no reason why the life to which it is directed ought to recognize it. Its supposed “authority and right” and the force of its “demand” are only presumed. The abstract word of judgment does not bring us to a situation of crisis within ourselves, or, in Barth’s idiom, to the point of “falling out” with ourselves, *Auseinandersetzung*, literally “setting apart.” The law evoking it may startle or terrorize but not touch our core. For it cannot persuade us of its authority over us.

The alternative to this “arid claim” is God’s yes to us, a term that sums up the covenantal love of God in Jesus Christ. Barth argues that only in the light of this covenantal love does the law of God gain its force for us. This love itself acts as the material norm against which we can measure our failures and rebellions.

This passage strikes a different chord than the passages I collected above on the leveling of human action. In those passages, God’s Word circumvents human discernment. God comes inscrutably, aligning certain actions of ours with God’s own work, not on the basis of any identifiable qualities of the works themselves, but solely as determined by God. But when Barth speaks of God’s No ordered to God’s Yes, not only in God’s mind, but outwardly, he relies on the fact that the gospel makes its appeal to us, to our judgment, to our discernment. Yes, the gospel remakes these capacities from the ground up. The point is that it does not work without them. Where the Holy Spirit creates faith, there God’s Word makes itself intelligible to us as a normative pattern, even if one constantly in need of reinterpretation and reillumination by the Spirit. The norm that Barth

⁴⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 579–80, trans. revised.

picks out in this passage and what precedes it, is God's covenantal love for human beings, God's Yes. It is on the basis of God's grace toward us that we can hear the commands of God. We will then see the directives of God as consonant with that covenantal love.

5 Conclusion

It is hard to imagine the kind of disillusionment that the young Barth felt at the outbreak of the Great War upon hearing his great theological mentors affirm Germany's lust for war in the name of God. And yet, many of us in different contexts and for different reasons have felt a kinship with Barth in his disillusionment. On the morning of November 9, 2016, many of my fellow American theologians and I woke up to find the world had grown strange to us overnight. The news that the US had elected as president a man vocal in his disdain for women, his racial resentment, his animus toward immigrants, his disregard for the disabled, and so forth, was disheartening enough. But the fact that it was in large part our fellow Christians who had put him in office sent reeling those privileged enough never to have had to confront the fragility of our social system. Those of us who felt compelled to protest this state of political wreckage sensed that we were in the midst of an "apocalyptic" moment. The current state of things was not simply a bad break in our recent politics, but a revelation of the rot that lay at the core of our social fabric. And we were becoming increasingly aware that no political movement could rectify things, no dynamite leader could get us back on track, no social movement could heal our fundamental illness. Like Barth, we sensed that we are in need of a God who is no prolongation of human political programs and paradigms. A God who acts from without our convoluted web of values. A God whose radiance eclipses even the brightest light this ragged world has to offer. And yet...

And yet when this God calls men and women, God calls us to action. This God, as Barth says, calls us to make our whole lives a response to God's own action in Jesus Christ,⁴⁸ to reflect God's action in our own, whether in affirmation or in protest. Even protest involves discernment. It involves defiance against the complacency that says nothing is better or worse, that the world is going to hell in a handbasket. To protest requires judging those actions and movements that

⁴⁸ "As man is responsible before God, he makes himself the response to God's Word, offering himself as this answer just as God offers Himself as the Word which is the foundation of his being." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. III/2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960), 570.

are closer or further from the justice that characterizes God's kingdom. If, indeed, the inbreaking holiness of God were not available to us as a discernible pattern, even a pattern full of surprising twists and turns, then it would shine no light at all. We would simply be acting in the dark.

Barth's categorical, all-or-nothing treatment of old man and new necessarily reminds us of the questionability of all human action under the still tenacious powers of Sin and Death. It endues the human actor with humility, reminding of the limits of human discernment and the ever-present potential for self-delusion. What it does not do is advance prophetic critique. Instead, it indicts all human action *qua human*, both the actions deemed unjust by communities and the community's response of protest. To get critique up and running, we need the material norms of justice and love and the conviction that, while no human action makes a perfect witness to God's own, an action's imperfection does not disqualify it from providing a signal of God's inbreaking reign. In contrast to his categorical treatment of sanctification, where he eschews norms, Barth provides an inconspicuous material norm in his treatment of God's covenantal love, which he describes as the key to human discernment of God's law. To recognize God's covenantal yes to human beings as a material norm is not to impose a rigid calculus on human judgment, but merely to affirm the visibility of God's work in the chaos of our times.

François Dermange

Calvin's "Christian philosophy" in Barth's *Römerbrief*

Abstract: The present contribution compares John Calvin and Karl Barth through an examination of the ways in which Barth refers and quotes Calvin and his understanding of "Christian philosophy" in the second edition of Barth's *Römerbrief* (1922). For Calvin, the "primary axiom of all Christian philosophy" is that God is true, whereas human beings are liars. From this it follows that human reason cannot serve as "ruling principle" for the discernment of truth. At times, due to a certain suspicion with regard to the theme of sanctification and 'newness of life,' Barth appears to convey a more pessimistic theological anthropology than the 16th century Reformer, but certain accents in Calvin's thought manifest similar lines of thought between the two thinkers.

Karl Barth's time in Geneva, starting in the fall of 1909, left its mark on his understanding of Calvin, deepening the academic knowledge he had gained during his studies: "Undoubtedly the spirit of the place [...] has led me to further deepen the experience I had gained from Schleiermacher's reading, by making considerable forays into Calvin's *Institutes*."¹

In that year it was indeed difficult for the young pastor-in-training of the German-speaking Reformed parish to escape the Church's festivities commemorating the fourth centenary of the birth of the Reformer. At the time, as a good disciple of Wilhelm Herrmann, Barth retained from the *Institutes* the elements that reinforced his liberal position.² It was only later, in Safenwil, that a turning point occurred: a theological one certainly, but also a turning point regarding the kinds of sources and texts he was reading. To prepare his own sermons, the

1 Karl Barth, "Appendix 38: *Autobiographical Sketches (Barth)*," in *Karl Barth – Rudolf Bultmann: Letters 1922–1966*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 150–58.

2 See the lecture Barth gave in 1910 on "Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte," *Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift* 2 (1912): 1–18, 49–72 (reprinted in *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909–1914*, ed. Hans-Anton Drewes et al. (Zurich: TVZ, 1993), 155–212. At that time, Barth knew Calvin mostly through secondary readings, e.g. Ernst Staehelin, *Johannes Calvin. Leben und ausgewählte Schriften* (Elberfeld: R.L. Friderichs, 1863) and Franz Wilhelm Kampschulte, a controversialist who held the Catholic chair of history at the University of Bonn, the author of *Johann Calvin. Seine Kirche und sein Staat in Genf* (Leipzig: Duncker und Humblot, 1869–1899).

young pastor was no longer focusing on the *Institutes* only, but also on Calvin's sermons and commentaries.³

When, in July 1916, Barth began to write down the copious notes that would lead to his commentary on Romans, he unsurprisingly consulted Calvin's commentary.⁴ Thus he writes to his friend Eduard Thurneysen:

Discovery of a gold mine: J. T. Beck!! As a biblical commentator, he simply has the upper hand over all the others and is even above Schlatter. I came to him through my work on Romans and will use him along with the others, from Calvin to Tholuck and all the way to Kutter; a real cloud of witnesses.⁵

What then did Barth retain from Calvin's *Commentary* of 1540? Not just its method, but also its content. He made this clear a few months later, in the lecture course he gave on Calvin at the University of Göttingen during the summer semester of 1922:

Every time I have consulted Calvin's comments for my own personal use, I have found pleasure in the way Calvin combines historical and spiritual exegesis, which I have allowed myself to do in my own way. His work not only provided me with an external model for my own study of the Romans, but it also provided a solid foundation for its content.⁶

The preface to the second edition of the *Römerbrief* (1922), written in Safenwil in September 1921, mentions these two aspects:

By genuine understanding and interpretation I mean the creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis, and which underlies the systematic interpretation of Calvin [...]. For example, place the work of Jülicher side by side with that of Calvin: how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, until the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become *transparent!* Paul *speaks*, and the man of the sixteenth century *hears*. The conversation between the original record and the reader moves round the *subject-matter* (which *cannot* be different here and there) until a distinction between yester-

3 Eduard Thurneysen, "Die Anfänge. Karl Barths Theologie der Frühzeit," in *Antwort. Karl Barth zum 70. Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956* (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), 831–34.

4 Calvin's commentary on Romans was first published by Rihel in Strasbourg; see *Bibliotheca calviniana*, eds. Rodolphe Peter and Jean-François Gilmont, 43/4 (Geneva: Droz, 1991).

5 Karl Barth, letter from July 27, 1916 to Thurneysen, in Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen, *Briefwechsel, Band I. (1913–1921)*, Gesamtausgabe V.3 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1973), 148.

6 Karl Barth, *Die Theologie Calvins. Vorlesung Göttingen Sommersemester 1922*, eds. Achim Reinstädtler and Hans Scholl, Gesamtausgabe II.23 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), 531; *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

day and today becomes impossible. If someone persuades himself that Calvin's method can be dismissed with the old-fashion motto, 'The Compulsion of Inspiration' [*Zwang der Inspirationslehre*], he betrays himself as one who has never *worked* upon the interpretation of Scripture in *this* direction.⁷

The preface to the third edition of the *Römerbrief*, written in Göttingen in July 1922, is even more precise. Responding to Rudolf Bultmann's criticism that he was promoting a "modern form of the dogma of verbal inspiration," Barth draws on Calvin:

[...] from the preface to the first edition onwards, I have never attempted to conceal the fact that my manner of interpretation has certain affinities with the old doctrine of verbal inspiration. As expounded by Calvin, the doctrine seems to me at least worthy of careful consideration as capable of leading to spiritual apprehension, and I have already made it clear how I have, in fact, made use of it. Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document – of any document! – except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words? This does not exclude a criticism of the letter by the spirit, which is, indeed, unavoidable. It is precisely a strict faithfulness which compels us to expand or to abbreviate the text, lest a too rigid attitude to the words should obscure that which is struggling to expression in them and which demands expression. This critical freedom of exegesis was used by Calvin in masterly fashion, without the slightest disregard for the discipline by which alone liberty is justified.⁸

So much for the method, but what about the content? What is the "solid foundation" that Barth found in the Reformer in the second edition of the *Römerbrief*? Rather than tracing the various mentions of Calvin in this book or signaling some of the implicit quotations in the commentary, I propose to place Barth and Calvin in dialogue on a specific notion: the notion of *Christian philosophy*.

The term appears in Barth's comments on Rom. 3:4: "Yes, let God be found true, but every man a liar."

Of what importance is the infidelity of those who have received the grace of God? It preserves and makes known the 'presupposition of the whole Christian philosophy' (Calvin). God is true: God is the answer, the helper, the judge, and the redeemer; not man [...].⁹

⁷ Karl Barth, Preface to the second edition, *The Epistle to the Romans* (hereafter: *Romans*), trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 7 (rev.); "Vorwort zur zweiten Auflage," in *Der Römerbrief (Zweite Fassung) 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooi and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 12–13.

⁸ Karl Barth, "Preface to the third edition," *Romans*, 18–19 (rev.); "Vorwort zur dritten Auflage," in *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 28–29.

⁹ Barth, *Romans*, 80 (rev.); *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 115.

For Calvin, the “*primarium axioma totius Christianae philosophiae*” (the “primary axiom of all Christian philosophy”) is that God alone is true (*verax*), and that “the lies of human beings do not prevent the truth of God.” On the contrary, these lies only makes God’s truth appear “more obvious and magnificent”.¹⁰

the truth of God is not nullified by the falsehood of men. [...] The Lord, notwithstanding the lies of men, and though these are hinderances to his truth, does yet find a way for it through a pathless track, that he may come forth a conqueror [...].¹¹

For Barth, the concept of “Christian philosophy” means that the Law, as the expression of God’s will, reveals both the misery of human beings, in contrast to God’s holiness, and the grace communicated through Jesus, “the hidden authority of the Law and the Prophets.”¹² Even after the Fall, human beings are not lost, for God grants them God’s grace.

The theme of crisis, borrowed from Dostoyevsky,¹³ also refers to the dialectic of the “No” and “Yes” that structures Calvin’s understanding of the law of Moses:

[E]xamine in order the chief things taught by Moses, and you will find that man, being cast from the kingdom of God [*the No*], had no other restoration from the beginning that that contained in the evangelical promises through the blessed seed, by whom, as it had been foretold, the serpent’s head had to be bruised, and through whom a blessing to the nations has been promised [*the Yes*]: you will find in the commandments a demonstration of your iniquity [*the No*], and from the sacrifices and oblations you may learn that satisfaction and cleansing are to be obtained in Christ alone [*the Yes*]. When you come to the Prophets you will find the clearest promises of gratuitous mercy [*the Yes*].¹⁴

As the “No,” the law is the limit of human life, and as the “Yes” it is the inversion of that limit and the new reality made possible by Christ. Although the law con-

10 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament* (1562; repr., Paris: Meyrueis, 1854–1855), vol. 3, 49 (on Rom. 3:4); *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 116. For the Latin original, see *Calvini opera*, vol. 49 (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1892), 48.

11 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 49, on Rom. 3:4; *Commentaries on Romans*, 115–16.

12 Barth, *Romans*, 96; *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 135.

13 Jean-François Roussel, “Karl Barth et Dostoïevski,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 49, no. 1 (1993): 37–55.

14 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 59, on Rom. 3:21–22; *Commentaries on Romans*, 137–38. The words in brackets are my own comments.

tains the rule of perfect justice, as all human beings prove to be transgressors, "another righteousness must be sought,"¹⁵ i.e. the one which is given in Christ.

The law had been given for this end, – to lead us as by the hand to *another righteousness*; nay, whatever the law teaches, whatever it commands, whatever it promises, has always a reference to Christ as its main object; and hence all its parts ought to be applied to him. But this cannot be done, except we, being stripped of all righteousness and confounded with the knowledge of our sin, seek gratuitous righteousness from him alone. [...] For though the law promises reward to those who observe its righteousness, it yet substitutes, after having proved all guilty, *another righteousness* in Christ, which is not attained by works, but is received by faith as a free gift.¹⁶

In this sense, "Christian philosophy" recalls the miracle of justification. For Barth, the righteousness of the just consists in this: "that they renounce their own righteousness" because "they are accounted righteous" (Rom. 2:6).¹⁷ The righteousness of God means that mercy always prevails.

However, the question of the law arises again if we consider that the law seen as a judgement is inseparable from "the covenant of free adoption" (*gratuitae adoptionis foedere alioqui vestita est*)¹⁸. The full scope of the law encompasses not only justification, but sanctification. Consider Calvin on this point:

[F]or as the Gospel [...] sweeps away all the righteousness of works, it is believed to be opposed to all those testimonies of the law, by which the Lord has declared, that he has thereby prescribed the way of righteousness and salvation. [...] For the *moral* law is in reality confirmed and established through faith in Christ, inasmuch as it was given for this end – to lead man to Christ by showing him his iniquity; and without this it cannot be fulfilled, and in vain will it require what ought to be done; [...] but where there is a coming to Christ, there is first found in him the perfect righteousness of the law [...], and then there is sanctification, by which our hearts are prepared to keep the law. [...] Let us then also bear in mind, so to dispense the gospel that by our mode of teaching the law may be confirmed; but let it be sustained by no other strength than that of faith in Christ.¹⁹

15 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 38, on Rom. 2:13 (*Commentaries on Romans*, 96); see also 69, on Rom 4:4 (*Commentaries on Romans*, 158).

16 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 180, on Rom. 10:4; *Commentaries on Romans*, 384–85 (my emphasis).

17 Barth, *Romans*, 64; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 95–96.

18 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.7.2, *Calvini opera* (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1864), vol. 2, 254; ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I:351; see Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 59, on Rom. 3:21–22; *Commentaries on Romans*, 136–38.

19 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 66, on Rom. 3:31; *Commentaries on Romans*, 151–52.

The new covenant thus not only proclaims God's unconditional love, it fulfils the prophets' hope that God will write the law on the hearts or change the hearts so that we could live according to the law (Jer. 31; Ezek. 36). This is accomplished through the gift of the Spirit, who restores the lost image of God in the human being. Regenerating human faculties,²⁰ the Spirit gradually roots the "doctrine" of the law in human hearts²¹ and gives the people the power to uphold the covenant.²² This is the second meaning of "Christian philosophy":

While it is the first entrance to life, all philosophers were ignorant of this transformation, which Paul calls 'renewal of the mind' (Eph. 4:23). For they set up reason alone as the ruling principle in man, and think that it alone should be listened to; to it alone, in short, they entrust the conduct of life. But the Christian philosophy bids reason give way to, submit and subject itself to, the Holy Spirit so that the man himself may no longer live but hear Christ living and reigning within him (Gal. 2:20).²³

Can Barth follow Calvin this far? He certainly does not deny that the law, rightly understood, is the demonstration, justification, and revelation of God's faithfulness. Can the law then be repealed by faith? No, Barth answers, this is impossible (Rom. 3:31; 4:8): there can be no faith without the law.²⁴

There is but one righteousness of God. This one righteousness of God is encountered by us whether we meet it in the 'righteousness which proceeds from the faithfulness of God,' and which we lay hold of and affirm and appropriate by faith (Rom. 1:17); or whether we meet it in the 'righteousness which proceeds from the law,' that is, in the authoritative standard of human behaviour, in the goal towards which human conduct is directed and by which it is governed. In the first case the righteousness of God is invisible, in the second it is visible. But it is nevertheless the same righteousness.²⁵

Justification thus calls for a "renewal of *mind*,"²⁶ in which the Holy Spirit repudiates the knowledge that human beings might have on their own and opens them up to a new life revealed in Christ.

20 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 39–40, on Rom. 2:15; *Commentaries on Romans*, 97.

21 Calvin, *Institutes* III.24.8; ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II:974.

22 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 1, 156, on Matt. 5:17; *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 277.

23 Calvin, *Institutes* III.7.1; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:690.

24 Barth, *Romans*, 115–16; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 160–62.

25 Barth, *Romans*, 375; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 507–08.

26 Barth, *Romans*, 438, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 591.

God's judgement requires accepting that we no longer belong to ourselves alone, but to the Lord. With Calvin (and the apostle Paul), Barth could certainly say: *nostri non sumus, sed Domini*.²⁷ Christians are then obligated to obey God's will and to abide by their faith. "Sanctification" means nothing less than setting one's life apart, preparing it for God and offering it as a sacrifice.²⁸ The decisive question, then, *should* be the following: is the practice of the law the realization of the possibility commanded by God?

Where such doers are disclosed by the law, and where such faith is discovered by revelation, there is Christ – 'the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believes' (10:4,5); and there, too, is the knowledge of God who has first known us.²⁹

Barth probably could go as far as to argue, following Calvin, that the purpose of human life is to overcome the opposition between freedom and obedience, in the voluntary submission to the ways of grace:³⁰

The plan of regeneration [...] is to manifest in the life of believers a harmony and agreement [*symmetria et consensus*] between God's righteousness and their obedience, and thus to confirm the adoption that they have received as sons.³¹

Christian philosophy thus puts the "Yes" and the "No" in a new dialectic: the "No" of judgement – God alone is true and man is a liar – and the "Yes" of the Spirit calling to a new life in line with God's will.

Despite their proximity on these matters, Barth seems to be less optimistic than Calvin. When Barth quotes Calvin writing that God's law condemns human beings as long as they remain under the obligation of the law,³² he leaves out the much more positive tone of the ensuing passage:

[T]he law of God condemns men [...] because as long as they remain under the bond of the law, they are oppressed with the bondage of sin, and are thus exposed to death; but that the Spirit of Christ, while it abolishes the law of sin in us by destroying the prevailing desires of the flesh, does at the same time deliver us from the peril of death.³³

27 Calvin, *Institutes* III.7.1; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:690 (see 1 Cor. 6:19).

28 Barth, *Romans*, 430–31; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 581–82.

29 Barth, *Romans*, 64–65; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 96.

30 Calvin, *Institutes* II.3.11; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:305–6.

31 Calvin, *Institutes* III.6.1; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:684.

32 Barth, *Romans*, 268; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 368.

33 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 128, on Rom. 8:2; *Commentaries on Romans*, 276–77.

For Calvin, grace means “the free goodness of God or gratuitous love, of which he has given us a proof in Christ, that he might relieve our misery,” and the “fruit of this mercy” that is given together is not only “reconciliation by which we have obtained life and salvation,” but also “newness of life.”³⁴

Such a position seems incompatible with Barth, for whom the fundamental human opposition with God is not only about justification, but also about the life of the religious person who strives to live according to the law.³⁵ Is it not significant in this regard that the very theme of sanctification is absent from Barth’s commentary? In other words, the very process of sanctification itself clashes with the human condition: the flesh will never become spirit, except in the resurrection of the flesh.³⁶ As deep as this ethos might be, any “daring to live” in accordance with the will of God is doomed to fail.³⁷

The more luminously clear it becomes that the demand requires my actual obedience to the will of God, and that God’s commandments are not grievous, the more luminously clear it becomes to me that, even in the simplest occurrences of my life, God’s will has not been done, is not done, and never will be done. For not even at the most exalted moments of my life do I fulfil God’s commands.³⁸

One might therefore think Barth had a more pessimistic anthropology than Calvin. Again, however, the dialectic is reversed if we remember that, for Calvin, “even in the saints it is imperfect, and for that reason merits no reward of itself.”³⁹

[...] no work is so full and complete in all its parts as to be deservedly well-pleasing to [God], and farther, there is no one whose works are in themselves well-pleasing to God, unless he render satisfaction to the whole law. Now no one is found to be thus perfect.⁴⁰

Barth knows this well, as he refers to the Reformers when he comments on Rom. 7:24: “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me [...]?”

34 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 94, on Rom. 5:15; *Commentaries on Romans*, 207–8.

35 See Barth, *Romans*, 80; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 115.

36 Barth, *Romans*, 261; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 359.

37 Barth, *Romans*, 504; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 673.

38 Barth, *Romans*, 260 (rev.); *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 357–58.

39 Calvin, *Institutes* III.11.17 (ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:747); see also III.14.9 (I:777) and III.14.11 (I:778–79).

40 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 571, on 2 Cor. 5:10; *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), II:226 (rev.).

Paul is not describing the situation before his conversion! [...] What Paul is here asserting was well understood by the Reformers; but it is misunderstood by those modern theologians who read him with Pietistic spectacles. Paul describes his past, present, and future existence.⁴¹

Although before the resurrection religion is "the last word,"⁴² this is immediately followed by a "No": religion is flesh, part of the confusion and the essential worldliness of every human being. This is equally true of the religion of Isaiah, the early Christians and the Reformers,⁴³ for how does the "success" of those in Wittenberg, Zurich and Geneva differ from the "success" of the popes of Rome or the supremely religious builders of the tower of Babel?⁴⁴ Religious experiences makes clear that sin is an established constant.

The more successfully the good and the right assume concrete form, the more they become evil and wrong – *summum jus, summa injuria*. Supposing the right were to take the form of a *theocracy*, supposing, that is to say, superior spiritual attainment were concreted into an ideal Church and all the peoples of the earth were to put their trust in it; if, for example, the Church of Calvin were to be reformed, and broadened out to be the Church of the League of Nations; – this doing of the supreme right would then become the supreme wrong-doing.⁴⁵

If Barth follows Calvin on this point, he also distances himself from Calvinism and its moralism, whether in its Pietistic or liberal expressions. The root of sin that makes God "hostile to us" and even "our deadly enemy" will never be extinguished.⁴⁶ Since even "the most holy are still far from the observance of the law and the perfection of God's love," their only recourse lies in the power of "the goodness of God" to overcome their sin:⁴⁷

Hence the only resource is in his accepting us through unmerited goodness, and justifying us, by not imputing to us our sins. After he has received us into favour, he receives our works also by a gracious acceptance. It is on this that the reward hinges. There is, therefore, no inconsistency in saying that he rewards good works, provided we understand that mankind, nevertheless, obtain eternal life gratuitously.⁴⁸

41 Barth, *Romans*, 270 (rev.); *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 371.

42 Barth, *Romans*, 236 and 313; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 324 and 429.

43 Barth, *Romans*, 276; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 379.

44 Barth, *Romans*, 265; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 363.

45 Barth, *Romans*, 479; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 641–42.

46 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.2.20; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:566.

47 Calvin, *Commentaires sur les cinq livres de Moÿse* (Geneva: François Estienne, 1564), 235, on Deut. 5:9; see *Institutes* II.7.12.

48 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 571, on 2 Cor. 5:10; *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 226.

For Barth, as for Calvin, “Christian philosophy” thus sees sanctification as both necessary *and* impossible. For both theologians, this opens Christian life to hope. The French language distinguishes between *espoir* and *espérance*. *Espoir* tends towards a known goal that one seeks to achieve. *Espérance* is directed towards that which is hitherto unknown yet believed to be truer than perceived reality. The hope that Calvin and Barth speak of is best understood as *espérance* in this sense.

No wonder, then, that Barth turns to Calvin again at this point:

[T]here is no element and no part of the world which, being touched, as it were, with a sense of its present misery, does not intensely hope for a resurrection. He [Paul] indeed lays down two things, – that all are creatures in distress, – and yet that they are sustained by hope. And it hence also appears how immense is the value of eternal glory, that it can excite and draw all things to desire it. Further, the expression, ‘*expectation expects,*’ or waits for, though somewhat unusual, yet has a most suitable meaning; for he meant to intimate that all creatures, seized with great anxiety and held in suspense with great desire, look for that day which shall openly exhibit the glory of the children of God.⁴⁹

The two dimensions of this dual grace – justification and sanctification – never coincide here on earth; they only meet in hope. Even though they can be sure of their adoption by God, Christians do not know what it means to be children of God. They wait not for the realization of a stable or fixed horizon, but, sharing the moaning of all creation, for the unexpected.

[I]t is no wonder that we feel disquietude. By repeating *ourselves* and adding *in ourselves*, [Paul] renders the sentence more emphatical, and expresses a more ardent desire, nor does he call it only a desire, but groaning: for in groaning there is a deep feeling of misery, there is also a moaning waiting for adoption. [...] Improperly indeed, but not without the best reason, is adoption employed here to designate the fruition of the inheritance to which we are adopted; for Paul means this, that the eternal decree of God, by which he has chosen us to himself as sons before the foundation of the world, of which he testifies to us in the gospel, the assurance of which he seals on our hearts by his Spirit, would be void, except the promised resurrection were certain, which is its consummation. For to what end is God our Father, except he receives us after we have finished our earthly pilgrimage into his celestial inheritance?⁵⁰

49 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 140–41, on Rom. 8:19; *Commentaries on Romans*, 303 (rev.). “[...] nullum esse elementum nullamve mundi partem, quae non veluti praesentis miseriae agnitione tacta in spem resurrectionis intenta sit.” J. Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos, Ionnis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia (Calvini opera)*, vol. 49, *Corpus reformatorum* 77 (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1892), 152 (on Rom. 8:19). Quoted in Barth, *Romans*, 308; *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 422.

50 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 143, on Rom. 8:23; *Commentaries on Romans*, 308–9. See Barth, *Romans*, 313; *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 429.

The believer's only certainty is that of no longer being at home in this place, without yet knowing the longed-for homeland:

The *groaning* of believers [...] arises from this – that they know, that they are here in a state of exile from their native land. [...] Hence they feel this life to be a *burden*, because in it they cannot enjoy true and perfect blessedness, because they cannot escape from the bondage of sin otherwise than by death, and hence they aspire to be elsewhere.⁵¹

For Calvin, if "Christian philosophy" thus requires a form of human ratification "on one side and on the other"⁵² of God's first grace, this can only take the form of humility.⁵³ Commenting on Psalm 51, he writes:

That even though he [David] brings nothing but a contrite and humiliated heart, this is enough before God, especially since he does not require sinners for all things, except that they implore his mercy, being humiliated and slaughtered. [...] We have no way of obtaining grace before God, except that, being slaughtered and confused in ourselves, we rest on his mercy alone and that, with a frank confession of our poverty, we present ourselves imploring, as poor criminals, in short that we remain slaughtered and broken so that he may straighten us up.⁵⁴

This does not mean, of course, that Calvin sees humility as something the believer can claim before God. The meaning of humility not only depends on the prior confession of God's first mercy, always ready to welcome the sinner,⁵⁵ but on God's action.⁵⁶ Repentance, like faith, is both required and offered by God.⁵⁷

Barth agrees on this point too:

This human situation is described in the 51st Psalm, where the Psalmist, illuminated by the light of God, finds himself to be utterly impure, conceives himself competent to offer no

51 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 568, on 2 Cor. 5:2; *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, II:218–19.

52 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 48, on Rom. 3:3; *Commentaries on Romans*, 115.

53 "A saying of Chrysostom's has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility." Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.11; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:268.

54 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le livre des Psaumes* (1561, repr., Paris: Meyrueis, 1859), vol. 1, 449–50.

55 Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.11; ed. Ford Lewis Battles, I:269.

56 Calvin, *Leçons ou commentaires et expositions sur les vingt premiers chapitres des révélations du Prophète Ezéchiel* (Geneva: François Perrin, 1565), 173, on Ezek. 18:23.

57 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 48, on Rom. 3:3 (*Commentaries on Romans*, 115); 210, on Rom. 11:32 (*Commentaries on Romans*, 442–43).

sacrifice but his own troubled spirit and his own broken and contrite heart, and recognizes precisely here the triumphant victory of God.⁵⁸

Here, however, the two theologians part ways. Calvin runs up against a difficulty which is primarily pastoral: how could one be certain of the sincerity of one's repentance? He answers by shifting the criterion for adoption to the divine decree. Predestination is therefore a way to remind believers of the unconditional and unilateral nature of divine mercy. But is it the only way?

Barth shares the following three essential theses with Calvin:

- Salvation must be considered from God's point of view, and therefore not according to human criteria. God's mercy is the result of a "voluntary decree"⁵⁹ and "it is to deprive God of this freedom if we come to link God's electing to external causes."⁶⁰ God's will is not subject to any external criterion, since it is itself the source and institution of all goodness: "God has more than enough of his authority of himself alone, so much so that he has no use for other lawyers who take up the cause for him."⁶¹
- "All of us [...] have in ourselves something deserving of God's hatred," and those whom he receives in grace are "by pure and freely given love."⁶²
- The Lord does not forgive sins only once, when God is justifying the sinner, but constantly and to the end. To ignore this and to "seek righteousness in the law [...]" would be only to lead us into false hope, to laugh at us, and mock us."⁶³

But by seeking to secure salvation and make it certain, Calvin's predestination violates his own three principles. Severing the identity between the hidden God who predestines and the one who saves in Jesus Christ, Augustine and the Reformers gave predestination a mythological character that deprives it of its true significance.⁶⁴

58 Barth, *Romans*, 81; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 116.

59 "Faciám quod facturus sum. Deo satis superque est sua unius auctoritas, ut nullius patrocinio indigeat." Calvin, *Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. Johann-Wilhelm Baum, Edouard Cunitz, Eduard Wilhelm Eugen Reuss (Braunschweig-Berlin: Schwetschke & Filium, 1863–1900), vol. 49, col. 182, on Rom. 9:15; *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 167 (*Commentaries on Romans*, 356). Quoted in Barth, *Romans*, 350; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 478.

60 "Haec Deo libertas eripitur ubi externis causis alligatur ejus electio." Calvin, *Calvini Opera*, vol. 49, col. 182 (on Rom. 9:15); *Commentaries on Romans*, 356.

61 See Barth, *Romans*, 350; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 478.

62 Calvin, *Institutes* II.16.3; ed. Ford Lewis Battles I:505–6.

63 Calvin, *Institutes* III.14.10; ed. Ford Lewis Battles I:777.

64 Barth, *Romans*, 324; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 444.

Without renouncing predestination, Barth set out on another path. When Paul states in Rom. 3:3–4 that if some have abandoned faith, their infidelity will not abolish God's faithfulness, this does not mean – as Calvin writes – that at least some of the Jews have remained faithful, for even if all had betrayed God, the reasoning would be the same. "God's gifts may evoke no gratitude, but they will not be withdrawn; God's goodness will bring under judgement those who withstand it, but it is God's goodness nonetheless."⁶⁵ The Church's hope lies in the kiss Christ gives to the grand inquisitor.

[E]stablished in God only, mercy is eternal, unconditional, unfathomable, it passes all understanding. We are not saved by our knowledge of God. Our knowledge brings us under judgement. That we are *known* by God, this saves us, it raises us up.⁶⁶

In Rom. 11:32 ("For God has imprisoned them all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all"), "all" is not limited to the predestined, as Calvin thinks when he links this verse to Rom. 9:16.

The entire passage from chapters 9 to 11 enshrines the double reminder of divine mercy (Rom. 9:15, 16, 18; 11:30–32), which gives God's fidelity a universal significance. We are all objects of both God's wrath in time and God's mercy in eternity.

By taking this position, Barth knew that the Reformer – who accuses the supporters of *apocatastasis* of "misleading themselves and dreaming too heavenly"⁶⁷ – would disapprove. It does not matter, since here Calvin sits on the side of those he himself condemns, who are offended that God extends his favour freely, without any cause being "declared and put forward."⁶⁸ The third meaning of "Christian philosophy" cannot contradict the first two and must therefore leave dialectics open-ended. Going beyond the "No" and "Yes" can only be all-too-human conjecture, and not the work of the Spirit:

65 Barth, *Romans*, 80 (rev.); *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 114.

66 Barth, *Romans*, 393 (rev.); *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 531.

67 "*Emphasis est in verbo misereri. Significat enim nullis obstrictum esse Deum, atque ideo gratis servare omnes, quia sint ex aequo perditii. Porro nimis crasse delirant qui hinc qui colligunt omnes fore salvos.*" Calvin, *Calvini Opera*, vol. 49, 229; quoted by Barth, *Romans*, 421; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 567.

68 Calvin, *Commentaires sur le Nouveau Testament*, vol. 3, 167, on Rom. 9:15; "and yet even in this case the flesh finds reasons for murmuring, for it cannot concede to God the right of showing favour to one and not to another, except the cause be made evident." *Commentaries on Romans*, 355.

We speak concerning the Spirit. But can human beings dare to undertake such conversation? For the description of other possibilities we possess a large vocabulary, but we have no single word which we can make use of to define the impossible possibility of our lives.⁶⁹

God remains the hidden, unknown, incomprehensible God, for whom nothing is impossible. Calvin would have done better to stick to what he sometimes sketches, acknowledging that he comes up against what he can neither explain nor understand, and leaving the last word to God's paternal benevolence.⁷⁰ The true scope of Christian philosophy is the "heavenly philosophy" which assumes that "God does not readily allow to know" the way in which God governs the world, and which deliberately masks the outcome of God's project in the "carnal sense."⁷¹

The last word, here again, can only be hope, leaving dialectics open in what it is not able to see, but to which it nevertheless holds fast. Even if everything seems to contradict its reality, the invisible is, in faith, more certain than what is visible.⁷² Hope is the confidence that death and life can and should unite – *sub specie aeternitatis* – according to one single rule: *Soli Deo gloria!*⁷³

⁶⁹ Barth, *Romans*, 273; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 375.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Leçons ou commentaires et expositions sur Ezechiel*, 173, on Ezek. 18:23.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Commentaires sur les Psaumes*, 412–13, on Psalm 49.

⁷² Barth, *Romans*, 103; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 144–45.

⁷³ Barth, *Romans*, 431 and 465; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 581 and 624.

Luke Zerra

Barth's *Römerbrief* and Liturgy's Formative Function: Critique and Prospect

Abstract: This chapter puts Barth's *Römerbrief* in dialogue with contemporary debates in Christian ethics concerning liturgy and moral formation. Some ethicists see liturgy as an important site of moral formation, others doubt worship's formative effects, and still others argue liturgy can deform participants. Barth does not take up exactly these questions, yet worship is central to his treatment of ethics in Romans 12. This chapter claims Barth offers both critique and prospect for debates in Christian ethics concerning liturgy and moral formation. As critique, Barth reveals a tendency to focus on liturgical practices *themselves* accomplishing the work of moral formation. As prospect, Barth points Christian ethicists move past debates concerning the formative import of practices and instead to other factors, including the work of grace.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, liturgy has emerged as a central topic of interest among theological ethicists in the English-speaking world. Some have looked to liturgy as a key site of moral formation. For them, the social practice of liturgy has a positive effect on those who participate in the practice, shaping worshipper's habits and loves towards the ends of virtue and justice. Others question such an optimistic view of liturgical practice, doubting liturgy's formative power is enough to stem deeply entrenched injustices. Still others think liturgy is morally formative, but that liturgy's formative effects are all too often negative, leading toward moral deformation. Liturgy is a fecund topic for ethicists and theologians, but liturgy's role in moral formation remains contested and unclear.

Where does Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*, the famed "bombshell" on the playground of the theologians, stand amidst this conversation? On the one hand, *Romans* explodes with imagery of God's disruptive grace and suspicion towards projects of moral development. Barth warns that the institutional church, its rites, and its liturgies are but "living witness[es] in history that [...] [humanity has] exhausted every human possibility" in their attempts to be justified.¹ Seem-

¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 338.

ingly this would place Barth among those pessimistic about liturgy's formative effects. Yet, Barth's ethics in *Romans* has a place for worship and liturgy. Barth defines worship as "the primary ethical action."² This point remains constant in Barth's later moral theology, with his ethics of reconciliation in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 being framed around the ecclesial practices of baptism, Eucharist, and prayer.³ Barth has also been used – whether tentatively, critically, or wrongly – by various theologians to develop accounts of ethics centered on liturgical practice.⁴ There is a liturgical dimension to Barth's ethics even as he maintains deep incredulity toward identifying ecclesial practices as sites of moral formation. Hundred years after *Romans*, where Barth would stand among contemporary theological ethicists is unclear.

What could Barth offer to contemporary ethical debates about liturgy and moral formation and why ought we to care? I will first make the critical claim that much of the literature in theological ethics on liturgy understands liturgy to function effectively in and of itself, giving the impression that mere participation in the social practice of liturgy positively forms the participant morally. What Barth's *Römerbrief* can add to conversations about the possibility of liturgy being morally formative is an emphasis on God's activity – not the practices themselves – being the locus of moral formation. Barth's *Römerbrief*, in short, offers a critique to many theorists of liturgy and ethics while also suggesting an understanding of worship that allows liturgy to be seen as either formative or deformative, dependent on the work of grace and not just an account of social practice.

² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 430.

³ Here I am following David Clough's argument that Barth's metaethics remain consistent from *Romans* II to the *Church Dogmatics*. This allows for continuity between what Barth says near the end of his career about liturgy and ethics and what he says in *Romans*. See David Clough, *Ethics in Crisis: Interpreting Barth's Ethics*, Barth Studies (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005). Clough's point about Barth's consistency follows Bruce McCormack's claim that Barth's work is marked by continuity and that his later work is a clarification of, rather than a transition from, his early work. See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Randi Rashkover, *Revelation and Theopolitics: Barth, Rosenzweig, and the Politics of Praise* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005); Joseph L. Mangina, "The Stranger as Sacrament: Karl Barth and the Ethics of Ecclesial Practice," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1, no. 3 (November 1999): 322–39.

2 Liturgy and Moral Formation

Before proceeding, let me say more about current discussions surrounding liturgy and moral formation. The literature can be roughly divided into three camps: optimists, realists, and pessimists. For the optimists, liturgy does important work in moral formation. Examples are numerous. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells have co-edited an introduction to Christian ethicists centered around the premise that worship is the context within which Christian moral reflection most properly takes place, James K.A. Smith has recently finished a three-volume work on liturgy's role in moral formation, and Catholic theologian William Cavanaugh's work looks to liturgical and sacramental practice as sites of social critique and transformation.⁵ For the optimists, liturgy ideally has a positive effect on those who participate in the practice, shaping their habits and loves towards the ends of virtue and justice. I am borrowing the term from Katie Walker Grimes' designation of figures such as Hauerwas and Cavanaugh as holding to "sacramental optimism" by which she means "the belief that the church's practices can, if enacted and understood properly, possess a demonstrable capacity to resist the atomizing individualism of the modern and thereby enable the church to performatively receive its identity as the body of Christ."⁶ Liturgy forms its participants into a sanctified people, perfecting their actions and passions so they can resist the deformative practices and luring vices of the world.

Yet there is also good reason to doubt the formative power of liturgy. Grimes herself makes this charge, showing how the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist have not only been ineffective in challenging racist structures in America but in fact are all too often co-opted to performatively reinforce these structures.⁷ Willie James Jennings echoes this in *The Christian Imagination*, giving multiple examples of how Christian practices have been used to inscribe racial logics

5 Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009); James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, Cultural Liturgies 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

6 Katie M. Grimes, "Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy," *Political Theology* 18, no. 1 (February 2017), 34.

7 Grimes, "Breaking the Body of Christ."

from the colonial period to today.⁸ Grimes and Jennings cast doubt on sanguine accounts of the formative power of liturgy and sacramental practice, tempering hopes that such practices can reliably form individuals to resist injustice and showing the possibility of practices being co-opted. Echoing Grimes, I will call this the “realist” view of liturgy. Here liturgy’s formative effects are mixed. The possibility of positive formation is not closed off, but liturgy may have ill effects because it comes entangled with other cultural forms and sites and formation which may co-opt and corrupt liturgical formation. Grimes and Jennings both demonstrate how the situatedness of liturgy within modern racial logics resulted in liturgy was co-opted by these logics rather than stemming their injustices. Put bluntly, for the realist, the Eucharist is not a silver bullet for the world’s ills.

Another option is to make the stronger claim that liturgy can be *deformative*. Call this the pessimist view of liturgy. Lauren Winner is exemplary here. She makes an argument similar to Grimes and Jennings about the misuse of Christian practice. What she adds is the claim that the legacy of these practices means deformation is characteristic of and intrinsic to the practices.⁹ No celebration of the sacraments or enactment of liturgy can escape this damage, which forces a de-formative pressure on worshippers. Where the realist basically thinks liturgy is all too often ineffective in the face of broader systems and logics, the pessimist thinks liturgy tends toward a negative effect, lifting up and sanctifying the wicked devices and desires and of our hearts. Winner presents a host of examples. The medieval rise of Eucharistic piety is inextirpable from the persecutions of Jewish communities which coincided with it. Diaries of slaveholders reveal how prayer spiritualized mastery over African bodies. Nineteenth-century American baptismal practices served to reinforce familial and socio-economic bonds rather than equalize them. Winner reads each of these as proof that injustice comes packaged with Christian liturgy and sacraments. For the pessimist, Christian liturgy amplifies disordered loves, reinforces cultural prejudices, and sanctifies injustices. The practices are damaged from the beginning, and the damage rebounds on Christians today.

With these options in view, we are seemingly left at an impasse, with contrasting accounts of liturgy and a remaining ambiguity concerning liturgy’s formative function. I want to suggest that each position shares an important feature that has hindered conversation. The optimist, realist, and pessimist alike assume – knowingly or not – that the liturgical practices themselves are formative. In

⁸ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁹ Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: A Meditation on Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

each case, the practices are seen as doing the work of formation or deformation *themselves* and *in the same way* across different cases. There is a settled conviction on all sides that participants in liturgy are caught up in a shared world, understand liturgy's symbolics in basically the same way, and are thus formed toward the same ends. With such a focus on liturgical practices having determinate ends and reasons it becomes difficult to explain diverse responses, uptakes, and effects of liturgy.

Examples will help here. Consider Smith's 2017 book *Awaiting the King*. Near the end of the book, Smith responds to what he calls "the Godfather Problem." The problem arises from the observation that there are numerous people who regularly participate in liturgy yet remain vicious people. If liturgy is morally formative, then how come it remains ineffective for some? The problem takes its title Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Godfather*. One of the film's final scenes shows us mobster Michael Corleone confessing the Nicene Creed during a baptism, with the shots alternating between the Corleone's active participation in the baptismal rite and various murders Corleone has ordered. Smith takes this as a problem for his account because his book has sought to show the formative power of practices, whether ecclesial or not, on human action. Corleone's confession of Nicene faith and participation in Roman Catholic forms of life ought to morally form him into a lover of virtue and justice rather than criminality and illegality on Smith's account. Responding to the problems this raises for his project, Smith asks "does Michael Corleone ever go to confession? Or is his participation in the rites of the church more ad hoc, on his own terms? [...] we have no indication that Corleone actually gives himself over to the cogency of a *way of life* governed by the rhythms and habits of the church's worship."¹⁰ Smith's answer, in short, is that Corleone hasn't participated in the liturgy enough or in the right ways. Here the practices are doing the formative work themselves and all Corleone must do is submit himself to them.

We might expect such a focus on practices from a liturgical optimist like Smith, yet this is found among the pessimists too. Take Lauren Winner's 2018 work *The Dangers of Christian Practice*. A consistent theme of Winner's is that deformation is *characteristic of* and *intrinsic to* the practices themselves.¹¹ Participation in liturgical practice necessitates submitting oneself to deformities that are part and parcel of the practices. There is no getting around the fact that Eucharistic piety and theology arose at the expense of medieval Judaism, as narratives of hosts evading desecration at the hands of Jews led to veneration of the

¹⁰ Smith, *Awaiting the King*, 203.

¹¹ Examples abound but consider Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 20, 35, 83, 97, 137.

miraculous hosts and pogroms against falsely accused Jewish communities.¹² To receive the Eucharist is to receive these damages according to Winner, and we are always at risk of the practice reinforcing Christian anti-Judaism. We must be aware of these damages so that we can better resist anti-Judaism in our preaching or reading of scripture, but there is no getting away from the damaged nature of the practices.¹³ Here we see a mirror of Smith: participation in the practices is enough to deform. We can take action to resist this deformity, but the damage is always packaged with the practice. Smith and Winner are exemplary of a prevalent tendency to see the formative effects of liturgy strictly in the practices themselves. Yet, they come to radically different conclusions although looking to the same place.

But what of the realists? Are they not recognizing the same problem I am? Yes, but there are two important differences. First, while the pessimists rightly perceive the inadequacies of either position, they implicitly retain the structure of the debate: it is agreed that the *practices* do the work, but the effect of these practices is cast off with a shrug. Second, while rightly noting the limitations of giving too much power to liturgical practice, the pessimists, for the most part, remain in the critical mode rather than seeking a better or different account of liturgical formation. For example, arguing against the optimism of Hauerwas and Cavanaugh, Grimes claims that “the church cannot sacramentally perform its way out of white supremacist habituation,” noting that this liberation will only come through a desegregated spatial habituation.¹⁴ There is much to agree with here. But note that Grimes looks to liturgy as a potential site of moral formation but finds it wanting, looking for a better sort of formation elsewhere, in a spatial habituation more powerful than the ecclesial habituation Hauerwas and Cavanaugh put their hope in. In other words, even while remaining chastened concerning liturgy’s formative effects, nonetheless share the assumption that practices themselves – liturgical or not – are morally formative.

3 Barth on Worship and Ethics: Romans 12:1–2

Up to this point, I have made the critical claim that conversations around liturgy and moral formation are riddled with an overemphasis on the practices themselves as accomplishing or failing to form practitioners. Barth offers a similar cri-

¹² Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 19–56.

¹³ Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, 137–66.

¹⁴ Grimes, “Breaking the Body of Christ,” 41–43.

tique, wanting to avoid making human practices such as liturgy sites of moral formation. Yet at the same time, Barth makes worship central to the ethics of Romans. Barth accomplishes this in *Romans* through a logic of sacrifice and witness.

First, sacrifice. In Barth's exegesis of Romans 12:1–2, a section entitled “the problem of ethics,” Barth defines the “primary ethical action” as “veritable worship of God.”¹⁵ Following Romans 12:1, he specifies this worship as “sacrifice,” writing that humans should present “their concrete, observable, historical existence” as a sacrifice.¹⁶ The worshiper is called to surrender their life and action to the unfathomable God, continually returning to God's mercy and freedom, glorifying God rather than self. Barth understands this as sanctification since to sanctify something is to “separate and prepare it that it may be presented and offered to God,” a definition synonymous with sacrifice.¹⁷ To act ethically is to worship God, presenting one's life and action as a sacrifice to God while renouncing all else. Here Barth explicitly connects worship, sanctification, and ethics. To worship God is to fulfill one's duty to God, and to worship God means to be sanctified. Worship is a moral duty that transforms the person.

In worship, individuals fulfill their ethical duty through submission to God's will and commands. This is a sort of sanctification as the worshipper is continually called to the greater submission of their own will to God's. Sacrifice certainly entails surrender to God for Barth, yet he is wary of understanding this in terms of growth and development, writing “[s]acrifice is not a human action whereby the will of God is fulfilled [...] [t]he act of sacrifice is in itself simply a human act as good or bad as any other act [...] There is no such thing as the ‘building up’ by men of an adequate ethical life.”¹⁸ Barth here unequivocally rejects understandings of worship which say that by rightly participating in liturgical practice one is formed into a particular sort of moral agent. Such an understanding would suggest that the good is something the human subject realizes *through* worship. To say sacrifice is at the heart of ethical action is to say that human actions and practices do not achieve the good. Rather Christ alone has accomplished the good, thus denying that our moral action “should take the form of *imitatio Christi*,” as Gerald McKenny puts it.¹⁹ For Barth, to see the

15 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 430.

16 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

17 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

18 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431.

19 Gerald P. McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace: Karl Barth's Moral Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 205.

Church as a “growing organism,” continually formed and perfected through its practices is to see “not the Kingdom of God, but the Tower of Babel.”²⁰

If worship is not a site where the human subject realizes the good then what is Barth getting at when in connecting worship with sanctification, even if this sanctification is understood as sacrifice? Barth’s answer is witness. Human actions are sacrificial in the sense that they witness to what God has done. To use Barth’s example, just as a May Day Procession is not the Labour Movement itself, but a demonstration of it, human ethics is a demonstration of God’s action.²¹ The ethical act implicitly witnesses to the divine action to which it testifies, just as the May Day demonstration witnesses to the reality of the movement to which it testifies.²² Humans actions do not bring about the good, rather humans “can act only so as to provide significant signposts and witnesses to the glory of God.”²³ The Christian must always be prepared to see their actions, virtue, and character as not their own possession, but as demonstrations that give glory to God. To sacrifice oneself and one’s actions is to acknowledge them to at best be but witnesses to God’s action. The good is not accomplished by our actions but is witnessed to by them.

Barth has already identified worship as the primary ethical action, but this focus on sacrifice and witness leads Barth to later write that “repentance is the ‘primary’ ethical action upon which all ‘secondary’ ethical conduct depends and which it is illuminated.”²⁴ Just as worship calls forth sacrifice, so too does repentance calls forth a process of moral reflection and rethinking, as the agent recognizes how all her actions have been “fashioned according to the form of this world” and how they might “bear in themselves the mark of the divine protest against the great error.”²⁵ This repentance directs the agent to new behavior, one which witnesses to the transformation of the world rather than to the form of the world.²⁶ To repent is to sacrifice one’s own claim’s to a self-generated moral good and to subsequently acknowledge God’s action as the basis for moral goodness. This, as Bruce McCormack and Randi Rashkover note, constitutes an “ethic of witness.”²⁷

20 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

21 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 431–32.

22 Rashkover, *Revelation and Theopolitics*, 130–31.

23 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 432.

24 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 436.

25 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434.

26 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 434–36.

27 Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 275ss; Rashkover, *Revelation and Theopolitics*, 129–30.

If the primary ethical action is witnessing to God's prior action through worship and repentance, then what constitutes the particular demands of the moral life? McCormack parses the distinction between primary and secondary ethical conduct as a distinction between "what God has done in Christ" and the "demand which a recognition of God's gracious action lays upon human beings."²⁸ The focus is on the primary action of witnessing to Christ's work in light of the fact that all moral actions are accomplished by sinful humans and thus not identical with the good that is God.²⁹ Secondary ethical conduct may be acceptable to God, not by virtue of its own goodness, but by God's acceptance of the action as witness to God. Those actions which may be acceptable to God are those which God commands in each moment. The task of ethics is then that of "discerning the will of God and bearing witness to it."³⁰ Primary ethical action is bearing witness to God's action, while secondary action consists in discerning what particular actions God wills to testify to this action. McCormack notes that given the critical purpose of *Romans*, Barth focuses in large part on primary ethical action, seeing "little incentive to provide positive descriptions of 'secondary ethical activities.'"³¹ The "positive possibility" of ethics consists in agape, neighbor love. When one extends agape love one is not loving the neighbor simply as they are, but in virtue of who the neighbor *will be* by God's grace.³² This contrasts with erotic love, which Barth takes to affirm the self by affirming the other in their sinfulness. Agape is sacrificial because it is always directed toward God rather than towards oneself and toward achieving one's own ethical ideals.³³

Barth remains abstract here, so let me offer an example to seek to clarify what I take Barth to mean by secondary ethical activity. Say I pass a beggar on the street. Offering the beggar food is a potential secondary ethical action. Recall that the primary ethical action is to bear witness to God's prior action. God may take the action as a demonstration of God's glory if it bears witness to the reconciling work of God in Jesus Christ. If I seek to make this action anything other than a demonstration of God's goodness, anything other than a parable of God's prior action, then my action fails to be ethical. Reasons for failure might include seeking to appear morally upstanding to others, desiring to justify my own righteousness to myself, or attempting to enact some altruistic human ideal for ethics. Each would be an instance of eros for Barth, of an action that

28 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 276.

29 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 277.

30 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 278.

31 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 280.

32 McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 278.

33 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 451.

seeks to glorify self rather than God. To feed the beggar as a witness to God's prior action, in contrast, would be to sacrifice such self-seeking motives and to instead be motivated by thanksgiving for the good gifts God has given in creation or in anticipation of the eschatological feast of the lamb in which every mouth is filled. Such action would be in witness to God's action rather than human action. Secondary ethical action is then, as I read it, particular determinations concerning what actions are in accord with God's command and the primary ethical action of sacrificing self in witness to God. Barth is ambiguous in the *Römerbrief* about how moral discernment and action proceed, but the outlines of this ethic of sacrifice and witness remain consistent throughout his career.³⁴

Worship is central to Barth's ethics. He describes worship as the primary ethical action, a point he develops through a logic of sacrifice and witness. One acts ethically toward God when one sacrifices one's own motives in service of witnessing to God's prior action. Such action is worship for Barth since it is in witness to God's glory. Note also the frequency with which Barth turns to the language of worship and liturgy. In describing the veritable worship of God as the primary ethical action, Barth turns to the images of *repentance*, *sacrifice*, and *exhortation*. These respectively call to mind the liturgical practices of *confession*, *eucharist*, and *preaching*. This language implicitly directs the reader to see the moral life as akin to corporate worship. Just as the liturgy of word and sacrament witness to God's action, so too ought human action testify to God's acts. The substance of the ethical action, like that of the liturgical action, is that of sacrifice and witness to God for Barth.

4 Baptism as Example

I have noted that Barth describes ethics as worship and have made the interpretative claim that Barth's ethics in *Romans* can be understood under a logic of sacrifice and witness, as the individual comes to see ethical action not as their own but as a witness to God's prior action. While Barth frequently turns to images drawn from corporate worship, this connection between worship and liturgy is made more specific by looking at a liturgical act that Barth discuss-

³⁴ As Hauerwas shows, by the time Barth reaches the end of the *Church Dogmatics* he has a much more robust account of human action as witness to God's action than he does in *Romans*. See Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 173–204.

es earlier in *Romans*, baptism, which Barth discusses in the section “The Power of Resurrection.”

Barth rejects understanding baptism primarily as a site of religious experience or as a symbol of the Christian myth.³⁵ Both make baptism's meaning something coming from the side of humanity, something which humanity can possess: an intelligible symbol or a specific experience. Rather, baptism is about being drawn into the sphere of Christ's sacrifice. The individual “dies and another is born [...] overwhelmed and hidden by the claim of God he [or she] disappears and is lost in this death.”³⁶ Drawn into Christ's sacrifice that is accomplished for her, the individual is to renounce her claims to baptism's effects, for “Baptism does not remind us of some attainable and positive conformity to Jesus, of some moral and actual experience of likeness of Him.”³⁷

Yet, having just said Baptism does not bring about an attainable moral conformity, Barth goes on to say – in his characteristic dialecticism – that baptism nonetheless involves “a visible conforming to Christ of our actual life in the world [...] in the light of His death, the union with Him upon which everything depends consists in the wholly irremediable questionableness of human life from beginning to end.”³⁸ Note what is going on here. Baptism entails moral formation – “conformity to Christ” in Barth's language. Yet, this conformity is not something attainable by humanity through the liturgical practice. Barth rejects this possibility full stop. Rather, baptism concerns God as the central actor who brings about whatever conformity and transformation may come from the liturgical act. The baptized are conformed to Christ, *by* Christ, and *through* Christ alone, not due to their participation in the practice. Baptism is not, “an ecclesiastical transaction.”³⁹ The proper response on the part of the baptized is to sacrifice her claims to the good God has brought about, to see her sanctification – as much as her justification – as Christ's work.⁴⁰

The centrality of witness to Barth's treatment of baptism becomes evident at this point. “Baptism bears witness to us of the death of Christ, where the radical and inexorable claim of God upon humanity triumphed.”⁴¹ Baptism bears witness to what God has done through Christ. So too are the baptized called to witness to what God has done through their actions. The baptized have truly died

35 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 192.

36 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 193.

37 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 196.

38 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 196.

39 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 192.

40 McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace*, 23–73.

41 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 193.

and been reborn in Christ, a reality which “necessarily involves a real walking in newness of life,” a new life which “presses upon my *continuing in sin*.”⁴² Yet, this new life which witnesses to Christ is not due to a habitual grace on the part of the believer but from the individual’s union with Christ, who alone accomplishes the good. The source of whatever moral formation takes place, of being drawn into conformity with Christ, is not to be found in the worshipper or in the liturgical practice, but in God alone. Any claims to the contrary must be sacrificed in witness to God’s accomplishment of the good on Barth’s scheme.

5 Conclusion: Critique and Prospect

What does Barth’s discussion of liturgy under the logic of sacrifice and witness have to say to contemporary questions about liturgy and moral formation? I noted above a tendency in literature on liturgy and moral formation to overemphasize liturgical practices *themselves* as sites of formation, to see correct participation in the practices as enough to effect formation or deformation. This assumption has created an impasse in the literature, as each camp agrees liturgy is effective through proper practice yet disagree on the import of these effects. As a result, neither side does justice to all cases: the individual whose life is transformed through a chance encounter with Christian worship,⁴³ the manifold faithful participants in liturgical practice who remains vicious individuals, the use of liturgy in social protest against oppressors who themselves partake in liturgy.⁴⁴

What Barth can add here is redirection toward God’s action and away from the liturgical practices themselves. For one, this serves as a corrective to an overemphasis on practice, one which can better account for cases where, to put it bluntly, liturgy does not work. If moral formation comes by Christ’s grace alone, then formation is not tied to the practices themselves, but solely to God’s action. God certainly may use liturgy to sanctify individuals, but sanctification is not bound to these practices. As Barth will say later, “God may speak to us through Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog.”⁴⁵

Many Christian ethicists – particularly those interested in liturgy – may be queasy at this point, charging that Barth collapses all human action into Christ,

⁴² Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 195.

⁴³ Sarah Miles, *Take this Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2008).

⁴⁴ Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 60.

thereby leaving liturgical action unintelligible *as human* action.⁴⁶ I will not defend Barth at this point aside from noting the many ethicists who have defended Barth against this charge, albeit not often the Barth of *Romans*.⁴⁷ What I will defend is that Barth's focus on Christ's activity in worship – cast through what I have called a logic of sacrifice and witness – offers a critique of, and prospect for, current discussions of liturgy's formative effects.

As critique, Barth points the reader away from locating moral formation in specific practices. Barth looks to worship as a key part of ethics, but the conformity to Christ entailed in worship is a result of Christ's act, not the worship itself. Claims to the contrary are pretensions needing to be sacrificed in the interest of faithful witness to Christ's act. In this Barth echoes Katie Grimes and Willie Jennings, who note manifold examples where liturgy fails to conform individuals to Christ. Barth would resonate with their points, joining their criticism of optimistic views of liturgical formation and pointing to Christ's formative work.

As prospect, Barth's critique opens an understanding of liturgy as *either* formative or deformative in particular cases. Liturgy does not form or deform in itself. This leads the Barthian reader of liturgy to look to other factors at stake in liturgy's formative effect, primarily the work of grace. Barth notes that we expect religious practices to influence moral behavior, but the reality of the practices doing so is grace rather than law.⁴⁸ Because formation comes through grace, one person may be morally formed by liturgical practice, another not, and still another deformed. The formation the practices accomplish is not guaranteed but is a free work of God, who works through the church's practices without being bound to them.⁴⁹

This seemingly leaves the ethicist with insufficient tools to analyze liturgy. Going beyond Barth, we can say some liturgies may do better than others in bearing witness to Christ or in sacrificing human idolatries. Take Cavanaugh's example of Chilean Roman Catholics' use of Eucharistic worship to protest torture.⁵⁰

46 See James M. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1975). For a response see William Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics: Living In Truth*, *Barth Studies* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2014).

47 See McKenny, *The Analogy of Grace*; Werpehowski, *Karl Barth and Christian Ethics*.

48 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 212.

49 For a similar point made through a Barthian reading of Thomas Aquinas see Eugene F. Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 251ss.

50 Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*.

This worship took a number of forms, from celebrating the Mass outside prisons where torture was practiced to simply denying the Eucharist to known torturers. The use of liturgy as resistance points to Christ's status as a victim of torture, challenging idolatrous visions of state power and thus bearing better witness to Christ than known torturers being freely given the Eucharist. Barth can say as much and would perhaps affirm such uses of liturgy but would reject seeing the use of liturgy in resistance as *necessarily* formative. For some it may be, opening them to the incongruity of Christian witness and torture, calling them to resist torture and other oppressions. But if such formation occurs it is by God's grace working through liturgy to speak to the individual. It is nothing about the practices themselves.

To claim that formation is dependent wholly on grace and not on practice may be an unwelcome prospect to many Christian ethicists. They may find it an unsatisfying account of human action, a deficient understanding of moral psychology, or a misguided dismissal of social practice. Barth's prospect may be all of this, and it may fail as an account of liturgy and moral formation. Yet if discussions of liturgy and moral formation are to move beyond the impasse caused by focuses primarily on the formative effects of the practices themselves, then Barth's critique must be heeded.

Anthony Feneuil

Did Karl Barth Put an End to Theology?

Abstract: Why does the *Römerbrief* give its readers the impression that theology can never again be done in exactly this way? What did Barth accomplish with this book: did he refresh European theology or did he put an end to it? This paper aims at answering this question by dealing with Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of Barth's "first" theology that, according to him, would have led to atheistic theology. The author's contention is that Barth did understand theology in the *Römerbrief* as founded exclusively on context. But although this contextual and anti-theoretical foundation for theology precludes epistemological security, it does not necessarily lead to atheism and to renouncing the theological task. Barth used the concept of "interruption" for theorizing this uncomfortable position for theology. Interruptions are a sign that theology is always already over and superfluous, but always about to start anew.

1 Introduction

The first time I heard about Karl Barth, it was as the *last* great theologian, or maybe even simply the last theologian.¹ This designation indicated that he was the last one who dared to write a theological work as substantial as the twelve volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, but it implied that he was "last" in a more normative sense too: the last theologian who could, in the European context, claim at once a full churchliness for theology and a full legitimacy in the academy. In this sense, it seems to me (perhaps mistakenly), that Barth is associated, at least in European theological faculties, perhaps especially Protestant ones, with a certain nostalgia.

2 Romans: the Beginning or the End?

This feeling is only a feeling, impressed upon me when I was beginning my theological studies. I am sorry to mention it in the proceedings of a symposium on the occasion of the Centenary of the *Römerbrief*. Not only because these proceedings provide evidence for the fact that theology still exists (albeit in the ambig-

1 Thanks to Sarah Stewart-Kroeker for her suggestions in revising the English translation.

uous mode of celebration), but above all because the *Römerbrief* is in itself a beginning and not an end. It is the beginning of Barth's work and theological career, but also the beginning of a whole theological school that transcends Barth himself. Beyond this, it is the beginning of a theological renewal for European Christianity. Moreover, if Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans is a theological beginning, it is also a commentary on another beginning, perhaps the beginning of theology as such, since the Epistle to the Romans is obviously not only a pastoral letter, but a full theological treatise, possibly the first Christian theological treatise.

At the same time, in saying this, I am aware that I am stressing a well-known ambiguity. If, for us, Paul is at the starting point of Christian theology, he places himself at the end, in that time that Giorgio Agamben calls messianic time and that he defines as "the time that time takes to end."² His letter to the Romans is a recapitulation and reinterpretation, in the light of Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning *and* the end, of a history that has already taken place and that has been completed once and for all. Thus, theology comes after the last letter, after the Omega, and this is no easy position. Theology comes after the end and when it comes, it is only to comment on things that have already taken place and that we no longer wait for. It seems almost as though theology is essentially superfluous. Theology takes place after the fact – and perhaps too late, over before it ever began.

If the *Römerbrief* is somehow the beginning of Barth's theology, there is no denying it is also and primarily an endpoint. It is well-known that with this commentary, Barth made a personal and collective break with the greater part of Protestant theology at the time. Surely, every beginning has to be an end. One cannot start anything new without parting ways with what was before. However, the *Römerbrief* is an end in an even more specific sense, a sense which is not entirely alien to the feeling I mentioned before: the feeling of nostalgia that any theologian can experience when thinking about Barth, this great theologian who ended theology with his dogmatics, even though it is not exactly the same feeling. When it comes to this young Barth, supposedly different from the later Barth, it is probably less nostalgia than confusion that one may feel – similar to that which Adolf von Harnack seems to have felt when he corresponded with Barth. Where does his confusion come from? It comes from his explicit concern that if Barth's method were to prevail over his own, it would mean not only the end of his own liberal theology, but *the end of theology as such*. The Gospel

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 71.

would no longer be taught but only “handed over to revival preachers,”³ Harnack writes. In my opinion, this existential angst concerning the future of theology can be felt by any reader of the *Römerbrief*. Any reader of the *Römerbrief* cannot but ask this distressing question: how can one still do theology after *that*?

There would be a lot to say about the *Römerbrief*'s radicality and the forcefulness of Barth's *no* in this early work. As Pierre Gisel's paper indicates in its title, *what to do?* more than once students have asked this very question in a class on Barth: *what can we do with that?* How can anything be built on Barth's theology? Barth himself was perfectly aware of the distress his thought could elicit: “Our plight is also our promise. When I say that, it is a dialectical statement just like any other – and we know what dialectic is. You may say, ‘Thank you for the promise which I only experience as perplexity!’ and I will not be able to answer you.”⁴

This distress may also be observed in Barth's reception, particularly the French-speaking reception. Bernard Raymond's *Théologien ou prophète* (*Theologian or Prophet*) illustrates the dismay that importing Barthian concepts prompted in francophone theology. The “or” is an “either... or”: it is an exclusive alternative between being a theologian or being a prophet. It does not mean that Barth was such a great theologian that he also was a prophet. It means that being received as a prophet, he was not read as a theologian and no *truly theological* school, with its meticulousness and necessary greyness, could develop from his works.⁵

But even prior to considering Barth's reception, one might suspect that Barth asked himself the very same question: *what is there to do after that? how not to give up theology after Romans?* Indeed, after publishing his first commentary, Barth did not simply go on writing and pursuing his theological work smoothly. Obviously, he *could* not go on like this and he had to start anew. So much so that he wrote the same book again, a new commentary (second edition). And then again. In the preface to the third edition, he wrote something very telling for us: had he had time to do it, he would have started again from zero. A third

3 “What is important is neither my theology nor yours, only that the Gospel is taught aright. But if your method should gain the ascendancy, it will not be taught any more at all.” Adolf von Harnack, “An Open Letter to Professor Karl Barth,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, vol. 1, ed. James M. Robinson, trans. Keith R. Crim (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), 174.

4 Karl Barth, “The Word of God as the Task of Theology,” in *The Word of God and Theology*, trans. Amy Marga (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 196.

5 Bernard Raymond, *Théologien ou prophète* (Lausanne : L'Âge d'Homme, 1985). Bernard Raymond is not neutral in this controversy. A famous translator of Schleiermacher, he is a prominent representative of theological liberalism in the French speaking context.

time! And he did start again, even though he did not rewrite *Romans*. He started with a new methodology and a new mode of exposition from the mid-1920s. And after this, even more remarkably, he had to start his dogmatics over several times. He published his prolegomena *twice*. Prolegomena to Christian Dogmatics in 1927, and then in 1932 he published the same book in a reshaped version: prolegomena to *Church Dogmatics*. Only then would he stop starting over every two years. Or maybe this is only what appears from an external point of view. In what follows, I will suggest that he did start his Dogmatics over several times again.

3 Barth and Atheistic Theology: the MacIntyre Critique

The feeling and discomfort that I have just summarized – which Barth himself may have shared – corresponds to a precise theological critique of his work. Such a critique was brutally but sharply formulated by Alasdair MacIntyre in a 1963 article. This article is in fact a contribution to the debate around the controversial book by Anglican Bishop John Robinson, *Honest to God*.⁶ In this book, John Robinson tries to defend the idea of an atheistic (i.e. without supernatural God) and non-religious (i.e. without separation between sacred and profane) Christianity. I am not interested in Robinson's book directly, nor in the emotional debate that it prompted and that is related to the whole movement known as "death of God theology." What interests me is what MacIntyre has to say about this book and the connection that he makes between Robinson's atheism and Barth's theology:

At first sight Barth's starting-point in theology is at the opposite pole from that of Dr. Robinson. And certainly as Barthian theology has developed systematically, it has remained a keystone of orthodoxy, by now a major influence among Roman Catholics as well as among Protestants. But Barthian theology nonetheless contains the materials for its own self-transformation. For if the Word of God cannot be identified with any frail human attempt to comprehend it, the way is open for sympathy with those who reject human theologies which have attempted to substitute for the Divine Word (and perhaps Barthian theology among them). So Barth has always had an interest in Ludwig Feuerbach. If it is any human work or word which we have to carefully avoid identifying or confusing with the divine, then we are in a very different position from that of traditional Protestant pietistic ortho-

⁶ John Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: SCM, 1963).

doxy. For none but God can be infallible; and hence no church authority, and not even the scriptures, can be treated as infallible without impiety.⁷

I should start with two critical comments that seriously question the historical accuracy of MacIntyre's critique. The fact that MacIntyre mentions Barth in a paper devoted to Robinson's book is in itself quite odd. In *Honest to God*, Robinson scarcely quotes Barth. He refers mostly to Bultmann, Tillich, and Bonhoeffer. In other words, Robinson's theology is rooted in theologians that it would be fair to call critical interlocutors of Barth's theology, to say the least. How can MacIntyre mention Barth as the initiator of this 20th century theological movement that would eventually lead to atheistic theology to the point of bluntly denying the possibility for theology to exist as such? To be sure, MacIntyre does point out the tension between Barth's orthodoxy in his *Dogmatics* and the breach that he opened up in *Romans* and that led to these theological developments, foreign to his later thought. But this distinction, however useful for MacIntyre's argument, is now questioned by almost all Barthian scholars. And if the young Barth, the Barth of *Romans*, is not so different from the later Barth, how could the young Barth have started something that the later Barth would not recognize as his own?

These reservations aside, though, I want to insist on the fact that this critique does reveal and express something that exists undeniably (albeit not pervasively) in Barth's theology, as a supreme point of tension.⁸ This tension point pertains to what a Catholic theologian would call Barth's fundamental theology. At the core of this fundamental theology, there is precisely no foundation, no steady basis, but a question mark and a void: the absence of any human foundation for theology. This is exactly what MacIntyre sees and states very clearly in his critique, and that he apparently finds so unbearable that he does not feel compelled to say why he finds it so unbearable. Only God can rightly speak about God. *Therefore*, every human attempt to found, to establish, and to *guarantee* a theological discourse with certainty is doomed to fail. It is doomed to fail from the start and in principle – and when I say in principle, I actually mean according to revelation, on Barth's terms. I will not dwell here on this paradox, although it is a very important one: the human impossibility of giving a right account of God is not a natural fact. It is not a consequence of human rationality's

7 Alasdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians," in *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. David L. Edwards (London: SCM, 1963), 217.

8 And not only in his personal theology. What MacIntyre rightly identifies and formulates as a characteristic of Barth's thought might actually be something very traditional in Christian theology.

weakness. It is based on revelation and for this reason, at the very moment when we say that we cannot rightly speak about God, we must also say that it is altogether impossible *not* to speak about God and *not to believe* that we can rightly speak about God. In this situation, there is no other foundation for theology but the act and speech of God Godself. Thus from a human point of view, theology has no basis. MacIntyre is absolutely right on this point and we must bear in mind that, from a human point of view, theology should not exist. It cannot exist, and the oddity is not that it is over already, but rather that there ever might have been one. And this is where MacIntyre sees an opening for atheism. After Barth, theology could only acknowledge its own impossibility and then stop. Barth would have put an end to theology, he would have terminated it. Theological game over.

MacIntyre's reading is therefore largely relevant, if not historically accurate. There is indeed in Barth – but not only in *Romans II* – an unescapable criticism of every religion and every theology as such. And there is consequently a criticism of Christianity and Christian theology and therefore also potentially a criticism of his own theology (“Barth’s theology among them”). Hence the fact that the way is indeed open to atheism: if no religion is true, and no theology can adequately reflect the word of God, nothing can fully preserve us from the possibility of ceasing to be religious and to be Christian. Contrary to what is sometimes said or even written, there is absolutely no doubt that Christianity is for Barth a religion like every other and as such a direct object of his criticism. And certainly nothing can guarantee that any (Christian) theological practice should go on.

There is one problem with this criticism, though. I have hinted at it already: it makes it inconceivable that Barth himself continued to do theology, and to be a Christian, without implying that Barth did not understand himself rightly, or that he made a radical turn in his way of conceiving theology after *Romans II*. This cannot be. So where is MacIntyre wrong?

4 Two Planes to be Distinguished in Barth's Theology

My contention in this article is that MacIntyre is wrong in considering Barth's development of his theology, and especially the constructive part of his theology, his *positive* theology, as a deviation from this initial and fundamental but *negative* thesis. He conflates two planes that ought to be distinguished. MacIntyre believes that Barth deviates from his own path only because he believes that the

two elements of his theology that he identifies correctly must be considered on one and the same plane. First, the negative statement that theology lacks any foundation, and the statement of its human impossibility because of what Barth calls the infinite qualitative difference between God and humans. Second, the positive theological work, be it a biblical commentary or a dogmatic elaboration (which are not as distinct in *Romans* as in the *Dogmatics*). If Barth starts with the first (the refusal to found theology), and then goes on doing the other one (positive elaboration), Barth is inconsistent. And this is indeed what MacIntyre suggests: that Barth is finally orthodox only in spite of himself. *Church Dogmatics* would be a betrayal of *The Epistle to the Romans*. But in fact, if MacIntyre were right, it would mean that *even in Romans*, Barth would be betraying himself in every and each of his statements – insofar as they are also theological affirmations.

This is why these two features of Barth's thinking must be placed at two different levels. The *first* level is the fundamental level of theological epistemology. But obviously this is not the only level at which we can place ourselves. It is even strictly speaking a level at which we *cannot* place ourselves, and that is almost all we can say about it, if we say anything at all. There is no epistemology of theology, at least none that could secure a place for theology among the sciences. The *second* level is the constructive and positive level. This is where the commentary itself is situated, understood as a positive explanation of what Paul tried to say. It is the reflection on the theological concepts elaborated throughout the Christian traditions. It is also the correction and guidance brought by Barth to the church he addresses.

Why is this distinction useful? Why is it better to understand these two aspects of Barth's theology not diachronically as two moments in the development of his work, but synchronically as two levels of his thought, always present together, at least since the second version of his commentary on Romans? Because then the purely historical question of how Barth changed his mind and moved from one position to the other becomes a more hermeneutically and systematically fruitful question: how to articulate these two levels? How does one level reciprocally inform the other in Barth's work? How does the fundamental level, the level of theological epistemology that marks the end of theology, in fact *reveal* itself throughout the theological exercise? How does the end reveal itself in the beginning and through its progress? How can any theological undertaking manifest the stigmata that it is always already over, that it cannot be securely performed in any human way and can only be a witness to our being *zwischen den Zeiten*, between the times or, even better, after the times, in the messianic times that follow? And more specifically: how to perform positive theology – a positive theology that is already performed in the *Römerbrief* – without letting

this positive plane obscure the negative one, the plane of fundamental theology, with which a theologian cannot directly deal, but from which the positive plane takes its meaning or meaninglessness.

5 *Theologia Interrupta*

There is an answer to this question in Barth's commentary on *Romans*, located in a very important passage at the beginning of the commentary on chapters 12 to 15. This chapter is entitled "*Die große Störung*," translated as "the great disturbance."⁹ Which *Störung*, which disturbance or incident, is Barth talking about? None other than the disturbance produced by the very idea of God in every human action and in every human conversation about God. The disorder, the incident to which Barth refers, is therefore in a way the very condition of theology, the condition of being objectively disharmonious. It is the fact that it exists whereas nothing (as far as we can ourselves tell) allows it to exist and therefore cannot be justified humanly. And it is the fact that any attempt to overcome this foundational lack (through what would necessarily be a natural theology) would be an even greater failure to give it *true* foundations, insofar as such a foundation cannot come from us. In other words, with this great disturbance, we are talking about the first level, the level of meta-theological reflection and the impossibility of any conclusive theological epistemology.

The question, now, is to understand how such a disorder at the fundamental level can concretely appear through theological practice, given that God does not intrude on our speech to disturb the theological discussion and to make us feel the distress that we, as theologians, as latecomers, should always feel. In any case, God does not intrude *directly*. Were God to intervene directly and obviously to disturb us, we would not be disturbed, we would be at peace! If suddenly, when we do theology, God were to intrude and to tell us that we are not making any sense, everything would be settled, theology would be more legitimate than ever.

But then what is it that disturbs and interrupts us? Not God, says Barth, but everything that is not theology: "the busy world of daily occurrence [*alltäglichen*

⁹ This English translation is a lot better than the French one ("le grand désarroi" [dismay]), since the chapter is not about a psychological or moral distress but an objective incident or crisis.

Geschehens].”¹⁰ One thing seems to be particularly disturbing: moral problems. Moral problems, not necessarily or primarily in the sense of existential dilemmas, but as the necessity to make unprepared and uninformed moral decisions. Events require us and force us to live and to make choices before we can think about them and before we can think about our relation to God. Life happens and we often have to live it without any Christian or theological concepts at hand, let alone elaborate and consistent theological concepts. This is how the impossibility of theology reveals itself: not within theology, not in the conceptual work and its possibly paradoxical interplay, but in its interruption. I quote Barth (who speaks after Paul in this strange style of the *Römerbrief*):

This is the meaning of the words: – *I beseech you therefore, brethren*. Let yourselves be interrupted [*unterbrechen*] – all ye who follow my thoughts, worship with me, and are pilgrim with me – let yourself be interrupted in your thinking so that it may be a thinking of God, interrupted in your dialectic, that it may be indeed dialectic, interrupted in your knowledge of God, that it may be what in fact it is, the wholesome disturbance and interruption which God in Christ prepares.¹¹

The void upon which theology is based may appear in this way: through *interruptions*.¹² There is no theological life that is not perpetually interrupted and forced to start anew. Ultimately, this is Barth’s very simple reply to MacIntyre’s critique: the end of theology, following the proclamation of the impossibility to secure its foundation in any way (on a reasoning, a book, an institution or a tradition), does not mean that there should be no more theology. It means that theology must always start again because it will always be interrupted, interrupted more specifically by the *context* in which it operates. In other words: when inter-

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 426; Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief 1922*, eds. Cornelis van der Kooij and Katja Tolstaja, Gesamtausgabe II.47 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2010), 625.

¹¹ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 426; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 626, modified translation.

¹² To my knowledge, only one theologian in the 20th century insisted so explicitly on the idea of interruption, Johann Baptist Metz. There are several studies on Metz’s notion of interruption, but I have not seen any connection made to Barth’s thought in this literature. The similarity between the two authors is striking not only because they use the same word, “*Unterbrechung*”, but because of the common thesis that there can be no “fundamental theology” but a contextual one (and in the case of Metz, contextual means political). See Johann Baptist Metz, *Unterbrechungen: theologisch-politische Perspektiven und Profile* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1981) and the study by James M. Ashley, *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics and Theology in the work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1998). This might be a perfect illustration of what Pierre Bayard calls “anticipated plagiarism,” *Le Plagiat par anticipation* (Paris : Minuit, 2009).

rupted, the theologian must transform this interruption into an occasion to think again what she was thinking before and in a new light shed by interruptions. According to Barth (and pace MacIntyre), the lack of humanly perceptible foundations for theology does not prevent it from going on. It prevents it from going on *in a straight line*. The theologian can keep talking about her object, but she must not believe that she does so independently of what is happening around her. Or in other words again, every doctrinal decision, including the most apparently abstract (on the trinity, on the economy of redemption etc.) can be understood as *in fact* a decision about the context.

Hence, “a wide reading of contemporary secular literature – especially of newspapers! – is therefore recommended to any one desirous of understanding the Epistle to the Romans.”¹³ This sentence is important and although the idea of the pastor with *the bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other* became a cliché, it is worth considering what it means, because it is far from the apparent suggestion that the Bible should be *applied* to our current times. Rather, it works the other way around. Paul did not build his doctrine of God’s righteousness independently from the practical problem he faced as a leader of Christian communities. Therefore, this doctrine cannot be understood apart from historical context. *But* since this context was not, at the time, *historical*, but was the present world in which Paul lived, this thesis does not lead to historicism and a retrieval of historical-critical exegesis for its own sake. Since the Pauline context was also the world of everyday life, our world somehow, even if in a very different way (and for this reason historical-critical exegesis cannot be dismissed altogether), we cannot hope to understand his text without accounting for *our* own context, to capture what his concepts were aiming at. Only by living in the world can we give the old concepts the life they had when they were young. Only the new context with its interruptive strength can allow us to begin again. Our theology and our understanding of Paul cannot be abstracted from our context because Paul’s theology could not be abstracted from his. Therefore, with each new practical problem that arises, a new beginning for theology is needed. But this is indeed a new beginning *for theology* and not an escape from theology. Theology will have to understand how *its own concepts* are to be reshaped in relation the world in which they appear.

At the same time, that theologians should let themselves be interrupted by their context does not mean that they should abandon theological practice and do something else that speaks directly about their social or political context, as if ethical, social, environmental problems or whatever, could constitute the explic-

13 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 425; *Der Römerbrief* 1922, 623.

it, direct object of a new discourse, beyond theology – but what would this discourse be, and would it not pretend to be exactly what theology acknowledges that it cannot be, “the thought of God Himself”?¹⁴ Because if we were trying to talk directly about the context, without taking the theological detour and without trying to address its proper task, the task of talking about God who is beyond every context and *abstract* from the context, “as men living in the world, and being what we are, we cannot hope to escape the possibility of religion [*religiösen Möglichkeit*],”¹⁵ we could only miss this context. We could only miss it because in order to talk about the world properly, for good, in short to be truly an atheist and give up the theological and religious *bias*, we would have to possess a type of knowledge exactly symmetrical to that which the orthodox theologian claims to possess when she believes that she can speak about God without being interrupted by the context: an ultimate knowledge, absolutely founded. A divine knowledge. It is only from God’s point of view that one could really be an atheist and practice an a-religious theology, a theology unconcerned with its own past, tradition and what is received as revelation within them.

Thus any decision concerning a dogmatic problem is indirectly but truly a decision about context. Therefore, no theological concept is fully comprehensible apart from its context and an account of the concrete existential situation of the theologian. But this does not mean that theological concepts could be reduced to sociological, historical or psychological concepts, as if theology must self-annihilate and become something else, a science directly concerned with the current state of the world. Theology does not have to disappear, insofar as the theological wager is precisely that some decisions about the context cannot be made otherwise than through theological concepts, and that the theological *detour* is sometimes the only way to talk about reality as it is and is for this reason unavoidable.¹⁶

14 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 426; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 624.

15 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 230; *Der Römerbrief 1922*, 369. A note on the translation here. It is less the “possibility of religion” that we cannot escape than religion *as* a possibility. Barth does not mean that we might escape religion but not its possibility. He means that among human possibilities, religion is one we cannot escape. But we can escape every specific religion (“We may move from one department to another, but we cannot escape from the store”), that is to say that we cannot escape religion as a general possibility but only religion as a specific historical fact. Barth will extend and clarify further this theory in the *Church Dogmatics* I, 2, §17.

16 In 1971, Pierre Bourdieu wrote a famous article on the relationship between religious representations or “interests” and the social material structures: “Genèse et structure du champ religieux,” *Revue française de sociologie* 12 (1971): 195–334. In this article, he opposes a Marxist sociology that would reduce religious interests to social ones. One of his sentences captures very

6 The Possible End of Theology as the Condition of Theology

With this in mind, one can understand that there is no deviation, no “self-transformation” in this regard between the *Epistle to the Romans* and the following developments of Barth’s thought. The fact that he later understood his own dogmatic work more and more clearly as *kirchliche* (ecclesial) does not mean that he switched to a more conservative thought (“a keystone of orthodoxy”) and abandoned this interruptive epistemology. A *Church Dogmatics* is not a dogmatics that is unconcerned with the secular world. It is not a dogmatics focused only on clarifying traditional concepts of theology in such a way that precludes any interruption, any new beginning, and any contradiction or unplanned evolution between the several steps of its development. On the contrary, that “ecclesial” nature of this dogmatics means that there is no such thing as dogmatics outside a specific context and a specific situation. An ecclesial dogmatics is first and foremost a dogmatics that does not claim to be out of time and without interruptions. It would be a complete misunderstanding to think that a *church* dogmatics is a dogmatics pretending to be relevant for all times, because it is *churchly* and insofar relies on an “infallible authority” independent from the changing times. To say that a dogmatics is dependent on a church is to say that it is dependent on a context and needs to be interrupted. *In Barth’s case and because of his particular historical situation*, these interruptions came primarily from the needs of the church he belonged to. But according to Barth’s own theological epistemology, this might not *always* be the case.

accurately the status of theology in its relation to the context, as I am trying to understand it from Barth’s account: “Religious wars are neither the ‘violent theological quarrels’ that they are most often taken to be nor the conflicts of ‘material class interests’ that Engels discovers in them; they are both things at once because the categories of theological thinking make it impossible to think and conduct the class struggle as such insofar as they permit thinking it and conducting it as a religious war.” Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” trans. Jenny B. Burnside, Craig Calhoun and Leah Florence, *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991), 15. According to Bourdieu, religious ideas are transitory and, since they do not occupy the same space that they used to occupy in the 16th century society, there is no reason to think that social truths might not be better expressed in terms of class conflicts than in theological ones. This is not, of course, what I am advocating for. I do not think either that what I call “context” is entirely reducible to social or political context. But what if theology was always or as long as it exists, *what makes impossible to think about the existential and social context as such insofar as it permits thinking it in a theological way?*

Because in fact – but this is something that would require further enquiry from a historical point of view – whatever Barth might have said about this, it is quite likely that for him, life within the church and the existence and importance of institutional Christian churches in the social realm were absolutely natural and unquestioned. No matter how present atheistic thoughts might have been during his lifetime, (reformed) Christianity was still self-evident in German or Swiss societies of the mid-twentieth century. Barth's explosive critique of religion goes off with a bang, but more like a blank-loaded gun than the bomb to which the *Römerbrief* has been compared – because of this self-evidence of Christianity. It might be that it is precisely because Christianity is still a self-evident fact for him that Barth could afford such a sharp critique of the Christian religion. Therefore, he did not give to his dogmatics the title *Church Dogmatics* in order to suggest that theology's legitimacy depends on a specific Christian institution, in the sense that this institution would provide it with the solid foundation that it lacks epistemologically. It is just another way – a way dependent on Barth's context! – to express that there is no dogmatics but *contextual* dogmatics.¹⁷

This, of course, raises one more question. This question might be asked by a follower of MacIntyre's critique. If there is no theology but *contextual* theology, because there is no foundation for theology outside of the context in which the theologian finds herself, one can legitimately ask: are there no contexts in which the theologian should abandon the ecclesiality of theology? Or even its Christianity? Could not theology become something totally different from what Barth knew as theology in his own context, and from what we know as theology in our own? Could not theology become totally secular or take new and different forms that we cannot even anticipate? Did Barth put an end to theology as a Christian and churchly practice? Could not the constant interruption of theology, in another context, lead directly to the end of theology? The question is neither impossible nor illegitimate. It is *possible* that theology as we know it should end, and Barth himself does not exclude this possibility. He calls this, with fear and trembling – but also some irony – the prophetic possibility.¹⁸

¹⁷ One might ask: which church? and to this there is no other answer than: *his* church. The (Swiss? German?) Reformed church maybe, but more truly *any church that would listen to him* and with who he could enter in dialogue. The church is not only where the theological practice is rooted. It is also and more importantly the people it is addressed to, insofar as these people answer, as the theologian, to God's call. So that, even though the idea of "*Church Dogmatics*" stresses the importance of the ecclesial context, it does not delineate any precise institution.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, eds. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 59.

But this is a possibility and only a possibility. It is not an actual fact. According to Barth, this possibility *should* not become actual. But it *could*. It could, and we should not try to protect ourselves from this possibility, because such a protection would come at the cost of forgetting the ultimate freedom of God and God's power of interruption. What I find striking is that for MacIntyre, the mere *possibility* that theology could end, the simple acknowledgement that this question arises, already means that we will necessarily assent to the end of theology, and to move in the direction of atheism. If the way is open, according to MacIntyre, one should necessarily take it – no interruption. But why? Why should an open way be a way that one ought to take? This should perhaps lead us to ask him in return (and those who blame Barth for leaving the question open): what kind of certainty do we want when we want to secure theology from atheism so desperately? Why do we want it? And is it not essential to the audacity of theology to renounce this kind of certainty?

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