

Karl Barth: from fighter against the 'Roman heresy' to leading thinker for the ecumenical movement*

Michael Welker

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Kisselgasse 1, D-69117 Heidelberg, Germany

Abstract

Karl Barth saw himself as a 'Randfigur', a boundary figure, in ecumenical theology, while important members of the ecumenical movement regarded him as a 'Wegbereiter der Ökumene des 20. Jahrhunderts', a pioneer of the ecumene in the twentieth century. Which characterisation is correct?

The article sheds light on Karl Barth as an 'ecumenical theologian' in eight different phases of his life: his wrestling with Roman Catholicism in Göttingen and Münster, particularly with the help of the Munich Jesuit Erich Przywara; his encounter and interaction with ecumenical leaders such as Visser't Hooft and Pierre Maury at the beginning of the Nazi dictatorship and his disappointment about the failing resistance of the ecumenical institutions against Hitler; his search for a clear ecumenical course during the Second World War and the Cold War thereafter; his contribution to the meeting of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 and in the preparation of this meeting; his complex and complicated dealing with the 'fundamental ecumenical question' of church and Israel; the reception of his theology in Roman Catholicism in the 1950s and 1960s through von Balthasar, Kung and other young theologians and Barth's interaction with them; Barth's engagement with Vatican II and his trip to Rome; finally, his personal 'ecumenical existence' in the last years of his life.

The contribution explores continuities and discontinuities in his stance towards 'ecumenical theology' – ecumenical theology in its various meanings. It depicts Barth in his journey from a fighter against the 'Roman heresy' to a critical pioneer of ecumenical theology in general and the institutionalised ecumene in particular.

Charles West, a young American colleague at Princeton, once asked Karl Barth to contribute to a publication in commemoration of the ecumenical scholar Willem Adolf Visser't Hooft. On 1 April 1962, Barth declined the invitation. 'In ecumenics, I have always been a minor player', he wrote, and 'theology is merely being tolerated rather than actually being heard there'.¹ Six years beforehand, however, Visser't Hooft himself had honoured Barth

with a contribution to his Festschrift, where he argued that to a large degree the ecumenical movement had Barth's cautioning and critical voice to thank for its current form.² At a memorial service marking Barth's death in 1968, Visser't Hooft strengthened his previous statement: in a particular way, Barth was a 'Pastor Pastorum Oecumenicus', a leading ecumenical shepherd.³ Which observation is then more accurate? Does Barth belong to those who 'paved the way for ecumenics in the 20th century', or was he really just a minor player, more tolerated than heard?

If in an attempt to address this question we turn to Barth's monumental work, the *Church Dogmatics*, and search for the term 'ecumenics', then the result is really quite thin. One would also search the index of authors in vain for Visser't Hooft or other leading ecumenical scholars. Yet this deficiency quickly changes as soon as one starts to look at Barth's biography, his other texts beyond the *Church Dogmatics*, and particularly when we consider Barth's intensive preoccupation with Roman Catholicism, not to mention the respect his work has attained within both Catholic theology and the Roman church itself.

Karl Barth was a passionate theologian, one with a fighting spirit. From the tales that have been told, he was also a humorous and witty personality who loved his freedom and who could easily impress and win people over.⁴ The anecdotes that are related about Barth are particularly rich. If we take these anecdotes into account and consider the different meanings that the expression 'ecumenical theology' can have, then one could easily write eight chapters about Barth as an ecumenical theologian.⁵ There is neither time nor space enough within this presentation to do more than pick out the traces of this character. We will have to be satisfied here with eight sketches of Barth as 'one who paved the way for ecumenics' – with small portraits which will follow the course of his life. In the second part of this paper we will highlight the thread which runs through and connects these different stages of Barth's concern with ecumenical themes: from fighting the 'Roman heresy' to becoming a leading thinker for the ecumenical movement.

² In E. Wolf, C. v. Kirschbaum and R. Frey (eds), *Antwort: Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstag von Karl Barth* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956), 14f.

³ Karl Barth, 1886–1968: *Gedenkleier im Basler Münster* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1969), 52.

⁴ See the sensitive and empathic remarks by Eberhard Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft: Einführung in die Theologie Karl Barths* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1998), 13ff.

⁵ Cf. W. A. Visser't Hooft, 'Karl Barth and the Ecumenical Movement', *The Ecumenical Review* 32 (1980), 129ff.

* Translated by Stephen Lakkis.

¹ Karl Barth, *Briefe, 1961–1968*, ed. J. Fangmeier (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975), 51.

I. Karl Barth as ecumenical theologian: eight sketches

1. Let us look first at the young Karl Barth, who as a theological professor in the 1920s at Göttingen and Münster sought to establish a relationship with Roman Catholicism. For example, he prepared lectures about 'Roman Catholicism as a Question to the Protestant Church'. He held a seminar which studied the first volume of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae*. In 1929 he invited the Jesuit academic Erich Przywara to Münster. Przywara, who had just published a critically acclaimed *Philosophy of Religion*, was invited not merely to present a lecture but to join in seminar discussions with Barth and his students.

Later, Przywara would recall how two chairs were placed symbolically behind the teacher's table 'to make the point clear that once again – after centuries – Protestant and Catholic theologians were "sitting together round the table" for a disciplined and dynamic discussion, where cheap compromises were not the goal but rather some final clarity over the disputed positions'.⁶ On 29 February 1929, Barth wrote to his friend Eduard Thurneysen about this encounter, noting how this very impressive Catholic guest had 'flooded' him for two days with his theology. Somewhat confused after all their efforts, he asked for some 'final clarity':

What is it actually with Catholicism which despite all our Reformation celebrations keeps it so lively on the scene? Was it an angel of the antichrist or an elected instrument of the Lord? The Grand Inquisitor or really a disciple of the Völkerapostels? Was it both simultaneously, or none of the above? . . . Somehow I find it very healthy temporarily not to have progressed at all very far past an astonishment full of repugnance and admiration . . . Who has after all seen things correctly from heaven's perspective, seen things truly and actually right in this great discord?⁷

As we will see in the second part of this paper, Barth soon takes up a very clear position against Roman Catholic theology in the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, despite the uncertainty he experienced in his encounter with Przywara: he calls such theology a 'heresy', i.e. a form of Christian faith which 'we can understand . . . only as a contradiction of faith'.⁸

2. The second sketch of Barth as ecumenical theologian is devoted to his time as professor at Bonn and as a fighter for the church in the midst of the

Third Reich, or respectively as teacher in Basel from 1935 and to his encounters with famous ecumenical scholars. These encounters were marked by an attitude which was at the least restrained, but more often than not emphatically critical of the ecumenical movement. A detailed representation would have to make mention both of certain people who visited Barth – namely the then Dutch General Secretary of the World Organisation of Christian Students, Visser't Hooft, and the French priest Pierre Maury – and of the activities that these three undertook together. The ecumenical scholars would meet with Barth, even on occasion at Bergli, Barth's Swiss holiday home and workplace between semesters. There they would have intensive exchanges of ideas. Barth agreed to present a lecture to the International Student Conference in 1934, and in the following year he presented a further series of lectures in Genf on 'The Unity of the Church', 'The Plurality of the Churches', 'The Task of Unifying the Church' and 'The Church within the Churches'.⁹ In these lectures Barth developed the framework for an ecumenical ecclesiology.

In Hitler's Germany, as Barth was under threat of expulsion from the university, Visser't Hooft invited Barth to take up a teaching position in Genf, in order 'to bind him firmly within the ecumenical discourse'.¹⁰ But Barth decided against such a path, not least out of a deep disappointment over the fact that the ecumenical movement, through its spokesmen and departments, was hardly doing enough to support the German Confessional Church (*die Bekennende Kirche*) in its struggle with the Third Reich and its fight against the Nazi dictatorship.

Barth, Bonhoeffer and others challenged the Ecumenical Council to display a practical Christianity, to break off its connection to the German State Church (*die Deutsche Reichskirche*) and isolate this church which was conforming to National Socialism. When in May 1934 the German Evangelical Church (*die Deutsche Evangelische Kirche*), which was under the control of the nationalistic *Deutsche Christen*, was accepted into the ecumenical Faith and Order Commission, they saw this as a slap in the face. Admittedly, in 1934 the council did also clearly stand behind the synod resolutions of the German Confessional Church, which were summarised in Barmen and Dahlem,¹¹ but Barth's relationships with the ecumenical movement and with Visser't Hooft remained strained and sceptical for years to come.

⁶ Erich Przywara, *Gespräch zwischen den Kirchen* (1956), 7f., quoted by Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft*, 197.

⁷ Karl Barth–Eduard Thurneysen *Briefwechsel*, Band II: 1921–1930, ed. E. Thurneysen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973–4), 654.

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter CD), vol. I/1, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 32.

⁹ Cf. Karl Barth, 'Die Kirche und die Kirchen', in his *Theologische Fragen und Antworten: Gesammelte Vorträge* vol. 3 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 214–32. See also Thomas Herwig, *Karl Barth und die ökumenische Bewegung: Das Gespräch zwischen Karl Barth und Willem Adolf Visser't Hooft auf der Grundlage ihres Briefwechsels, 1930–1968* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1998).

¹⁰ Herwig, *Karl Barth*, 33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

3. Our third sketch looks at Barth's search for a clear ecumenical course during the Second World War and during the years of the Cold War. In this section, we recall Barth's friendship with Josef Hromádka, a theologian from Prague. The two participated in a theological discourse over many years. However, there are also great subjective and objective difficulties to bear in mind, difficulties which Barth had in explaining his position – difficulties which often isolated him. When on 19 September 1939 in an open letter to Hromádka he called for military opposition against the Germans and voiced the conviction that 'every Czechian soldier will stand and fall, not only for the freedom of Europe but for the Christian Church',¹² a storm of indignation broke out. The National Socialist press, among others, denounced Barth as an evil warmonger.

As Barth came to realise that with the outbreak of the Second World War the Ecumenical Council was not going to establish any clear position regarding the *Deutsche Christen* and the German politics of war, he began to write a long series of ecumenical circular letters to Christians and communities in different countries which were later published under the title *Eine Schweizer Stimme* (*A Swiss Voice*).¹³ He tried to highlight and promote the message of the German Confessional Church and in particular its Barmen Theological Declaration within the entire ecumenical movement, an activity which led to the accusation that Barth was trying to run the ecumenical movement on his own terms.¹⁴

Great difficulties were to face Barth, in particular his attempt to explain his position within broader circles immediately after the war and during the 1950s. He stressed time and again that the church stands 'above powers and world views' and that it cannot allow 'itself to be bound in principle by any tradition, ideology or interpretation of history – except alone by the one task of preaching the Gospel'. Yet this task is to be tackled in the complete frankness of the faith, in the certainty that 'Jesus Christ also died for the "Marxists", yet also for the "Capitalists", the "Imperialists" and the "Fascists"'.¹⁵ Many could not, and still cannot, understand this position. They just could not comprehend how the theological summation that the church must preach the gospel could be consistent with the very concrete and engaged political and socio-ethical statements that were coming out of the Pilgerstrasse in Basel (and from 1955 from the Bruderholzallee) and being relayed to the entire world.

4. The fourth portrait deals with Barth's participation in preparing for and running the World Conference of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. This involvement can be seen as expressing Barth's approval of the institution of the ecumenical movement and of the newly formed World Council of Churches. In John Godsey's book *Karl Barth: How I Changed My Mind*, Barth himself conceded a change in his convictions.¹⁶ He was asked to open the conference and to speak on the topic 'Chaos in the World and God's Plan for Salvation'. In a manoeuvre characteristic of Barth's theological thought, he stressed the urgent need to speak first of God's plan for salvation and *only then* about the problems and disasters of the world. Otherwise one runs the risk of getting bogged down in the self-admiration of the world and then fighting and rectifying merely a variety of human plans and needs in the world. 'Only a church which is receptive to the salvific work and word of God in Jesus Christ is in the position to perceive itself as a part of this lost world'.¹⁷ Only such a church is in a position to concentrate seriously on God's salvific actions.

Extending beyond this much-discussed presentation, Barth participated in many commissions at this World Conference of Churches. In the first section, 'Questions about the Church and its Unity', he made suggestions for a hermeneutical handling of ecumenical differences which were received very positively from different prominent theologians, such as the Anglican Arthur Michael Ramsey, the Orthodox Georges Florovsky and the Lutheran Anders Nygren. Barth argued that the greatest differences, which give grounds for separation, should be drawn out in order to seek within those very differences a final basis of unity. Less convincing and successful was Barth's participation in the Committee for the Life and Work of Women in the Church. Many of the participating women simply saw the defensive patriarchs, above all in Barth's theses.

Barth himself, however, found a positive balance overall. He now valued the openness of the ecumenical scholars to a genuine theological orientation; he praised their capabilities in dealing with differences. Even the creativity and weightiness of the work that was achieved together impressed him. Not least of all, he valued the energy that was expended in order to avoid the formation of political and ecclesio-political factions. He was especially taken by the so-called 'young churches' outside Europe and North America, and spent a great deal of time striking up intense discussions with their representatives. Luther once described the gospel as a 'passing rain shower'. This shower was seen to be travelling out across the world, bringing with it its revitalising

¹² Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft*, 302.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme, 1938-1945* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1945).

¹⁴ Herwig, *Karl Barth*, 76.

¹⁵ Afterword to J. Hromádka, *Evangelium für Atheisten* (Zurich: Arche, 1969), 63.

¹⁶ John D. Godsey (ed.), *Karl Barth: How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond, TN: John Knox, 1966), 59ff.

¹⁷ Herwig, *Karl Barth*, 157.

effects, even when Luther was just sharing a beer with 'Meister Melanchthon'. Barth picked up this image and wrote: it has become clear to me 'that the possible cessation of this "passing rain shower" here in Europe would simply mean that in the meantime it had begun raining somewhere else . . .'.¹⁸

5. Our fifth sketch begins with Barth's often repeated statement 'that in the end there is only one great ecumenical question left: our relationship to the Jews'.¹⁹ On this point, however, there is still a lot of work to be done, especially as this pointed thesis was not clearly worked out by Barth himself. In 1942, he published in volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics* his understanding of the so-called doctrine of election, which saw the people of God within the doubled form of church and Israel.²⁰

To the great disappointment of the organisers, Barth cancelled a planned trip to the World Conference of Churches in the United States. He sent a text, however, 'Israel's Hope', which was the product of one of his seminars in Basel. Yet it is still unclear today whether Barth had merely put together and edited the work of his students or whether he had made an actual contribution to this document. The text, its production and its acceptance at the conference urgently requires detailed investigation.²¹ Such an investigation would not only clarify many interesting historical facts about the church and the ecumenical movement, but would shed light above all upon Barth's thesis about the relationship between Christians and Jews, between the church and Israel.

At the beginning of September 1967, Barth came across the book *Die Entdeckung des Judentums für die christliche Theologie: Israel im Denken Karl Barths*²² (*The Discovery of Judaism for Christian Theology: Israel in the Work of Karl Barth*), written by Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, a theologian from Berlin. Clearly moved, Barth wrote to the author²³ and sent him several copies of published and unpublished texts dating from 1938 where he had dealt with this topic. It is clear that Barth never arrived here at a consolidated position.

6. Our sixth sketch looks at the reception of Barth's work within Roman Catholicism in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the best, if not the best publication about Barth's theology is a book by Hans Urs von Balthasar, published in 1951 under the succinct title *Karl Barth: A Representation and*

Interpretation of his Theology.²⁴ The book is the product of ten lectures on the topic of 'Karl Barth and Catholicism' which were presented by Balthasar in 1948/9 in Basel and which even Barth himself regularly attended, in order 'to let [Balthasar] teach me something about myself'. Afterwards, a small group, including Balthasar, would head off for the post mortem, generally held over a glass of wine at the Charon, an inn at Spalentor in Basel where Barth liked to take his visitors and students.²⁵

In Paris in 1956, two Roman Catholic theologians presented rather weighty doctoral dissertations on Barth. In his biography, Busch reports how 'in the middle of June 1956, Barth travelled to Paris along with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne Kaegy-von Speyr. They wanted to experience first hand "the awarding of a doctorate to a Jesuit", Père Henri Bouillard.' Bouillard had written an astonishing 1,200 pages about Barth which were later published in three volumes.²⁶ At the Sorbonne, in the presence of Barth himself, Bouillard was examined on his dissertation for five hours. Afterwards, they held a celebratory dinner at a local Chinese restaurant.²⁷ In quick succession, also in Paris, Hans Küng took out his doctorate with a dissertation he wrote in Rome and which dealt with the issue of Barth's doctrine of the justification of humanity before God. In this dissertation he argued that Barth's doctrine is completely compatible with Roman Catholic teaching and hence represented a bridge between Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. With obvious joy, Barth commented to his son that 'a magnificent Catholic contemporary', 'Küng, that exceedingly determined theologian from Lucerne', has 'written a text about "my" doctrine of justification at the Germanicum in Rome, that is so to say, under the very nose of his Holiness'.²⁸ Barth wrote the foreword for the book in which he argued that Küng had reproduced his thoughts well and appropriately. 'Furthermore, like Noah from the window of my ark, I greet your book as a further clear sign that the flood of our times, in which Catholic and Protestant theologians only ever want to talk either polemically against one another or in noncommittal pacifism if at all, is far from over: the waters are still rising'.²⁹

7. The next portrait of Barth as ecumenical theologian deals with his intensive involvement in the negotiations of the Second Vatican Council

¹⁸ Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft*, 373.

¹⁹ *Frankfurter Rundschau* 1976/XXVIII 27.

²⁰ Cf. CD II/2, §34; see also Eberhard Busch, *Unter dem Bogen des einen Bundes: Karl Barth und die Juden, 1933-1945* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1996).

²¹ Cf. Visser't Hooft, 'Karl Barth and the Ecumenical Movement', 146ff.

²² F.-W. Marquardt, *Die Entdeckung des Judentums für die christliche Theologie: Israel im Denken Karl Barths* (Munich: Kaiser, 1967).

²³ Barth, *Briefe, 1961-1968*, 419-23.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie*, 4th edn (Einsiedeln: Benzinger, 1976). Recently republished in English translation as *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

²⁵ Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft*, 375.

²⁶ Henri Bouillard, *Karl Barth* (Paris: Aubier, 1957).

²⁷ See Busch, *Die große Leidenschaft*, 437.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Hans Küng, *Rechtfertigung* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1957), 13.

and his trip to Rome in 1966. In 1963, the office of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome asked Barth 'indirectly and unofficially' whether he would want to join in the last two sessions of the council as an observer. Barth could not accept the invitation for health reasons. About two-and-a-half years later, Barth signalled that he would like to come on a private visit to Rome and to the Vatican. He undertook a detailed study of the council's resulting 16 Latin texts and formulated a list of 'questions to clarity' as well as 'critical questions' which he wanted to present during his visit. In 1967 these questions, along with a brief report about the trip, were published in a small volume entitled *Ad limina apostolorum*.³⁰

As regards the trip itself, on 22 September 1966 the 80-year-old Barth set off for one week in the 'Holy City', accompanied by his wife and a Catholic friend and medical doctor, Alfred Briellmann. He had several good encounters with the Benedictines and Dominicans, in particular with Karl Rahner and Josef Ratzinger. A discussion with the Jesuits on the roof of the Gregoriana Papal University pleased Barth especially. Apparently the encounter with Cardinal Bea (director of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity) did not progress as peacefully as Barth at first represented. Briellmann tells how the discussion finally came to the topic of a natural knowledge of God, which the cardinal defended 'in a quiet and measured way'. 'Yet in the discussion as opponent of this teaching, Karl Barth became more and more adamant in his arguments and finally began audibly striking his fist down on the right arm of his chair with every sentence'. With 'gentle kicks . . . under the table' the doctor tried in vain 'to tone down the theological professor's agitation'.³¹

The encounter with Pope Paul VI, on the other hand, ran much more smoothly, although even here theological differences were raised (for example the question of Mariology). Barth himself said in summary that

the Pope had heard that I would prefer to see Joseph, the father of Jesus, as the archetype of the being and function of the church rather than an *ancilla Domini* belatedly raised to be queen of heaven. He assured me that he would pray for me, that even in my old age I may be given a still deeper insight into this matter.³²

Yet Barth stressed in conclusion that 'he returned from Rome as defiantly Protestant' as he had been upon his arrival.³³ But he valued greatly the

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Ad limina apostolorum* (Zürich: EVZ, 1967).

³¹ Alfred Briellmann, 'Karl Barth als ökumenischer Christ', in Universität Basel, Theologische Fakultät, *Das theologische Erbe Karl Barths und die Kirche von heute: Erinnerungsfeier zum 10. Todestag von Karl Barth*. 1978, Basel (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1979), 20f.

³² *Ad limina*, 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

renewal that was taking place through the Second Vatican Council, above all the orientation of Catholic theology toward the text. He wrote: 'I have met up close a church and a theology which have been set in motion – a motion, the consequences of which are incalculable, slow, but certainly real and which can no longer be reversed – and in view of which one could only wish that it allows something similar to occur with us'.³⁴ In 1968 there was a brief exchange of letters between Barth and the Vatican which sought to explicate once again his critical questions about Roman Catholic doctrine. We will come back to these points in the second part of this contribution.

8. On 10 December 1978, the Basel Theological Faculty commemorated the tenth anniversary of Barth's death. During the service, which was held at the Church of St Leonhard in Basel, Alfred Briellmann – who acted as Barth's doctor in the last years of his life – spoke about 'Karl Barth as an ecumenical Christian'. Our final sketch regarding the personal, ecumenical existence and piety of Karl Barth connects to this contribution by his doctor and friend. Each year between 1954 and 1964, except on those occasions when his health would not allow it, Barth received a group of ecumenical scholars from Genf, who visited him in order to keep him up to date on the development of the ecumenical movement. In the last years of his life, he often invited 'a few young Catholic vicars to discussions and to seminars together at his house'. But above all, in the last years of his life Barth practised and testified to an impressive, personal ecumenical existence, an aspect about which even Briellmann could report: 'Karl Barth was to we Catholics, and in particular to our Brother Laus Community in Bruderholz, a true and real friend. He visited Mass together with me several times and on occasion also alone'.³⁵ Yet Barth also invited his friend to return the visit at the Reformed Titus Community. Together and in all modesty they contributed to the development of an ecumenical partnership that extended over many years. Almost every Sunday Barth would listen to both the Reformed and the Catholic service on the radio and often, according to Briellmann, would be 'delighted to find a "resonance" in the message and preaching'.³⁶ Yet this ecumenical manner, which was observable not merely in his final years, should not distract us or allow us to lose sight of the deeply critical element in Barth's relationship to Roman Catholicism. This critical stance was maintained in his theology over decades, and the theological view and conviction that determined this critique was formative for Barth's relationship with the ecumenical movement in general.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ Briellmann, 'Karl Barth als ökumenischer Christ', 19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, cf. 22f.

II. From fighter against the 'Roman heresy' to leading thinker of the ecumenical movement

On 3 October 1967, Barth wrote to Pope Paul VI thanking him for the reception he had received at the Vatican in the previous year and congratulating the Pope on his 70th birthday. In November, a response arrived from the Vatican which was personally signed by the Pope. In January 1968, a gift of books arrived from the Vatican. Barth returned his thanks in March and, as we clearly see from the correspondence of the last years of his life, was extremely happy about this honour and about his 'direct contact to Rome'. At the end of July, Barth received once again two valuable books via the papal secretary of state and the nuncio. He responded in September with a letter, in part with extreme humility, addressed to the 'Holy Father'. Yet in the second section of this letter, he began to make very critical responses to the theological statements that appeared in the papal encyclical *Humanae vitae* (on birth control) which appeared on 25 July 1968.

Barth clearly formulated both the difference of opinion as well as his critique: the point that concerned him 'is the fundamental theological problem of "natural law", which raises serious problems within the encyclical – in particular its valuation as a second source of revelation . . .'.³⁷ Many of the encyclical's opponents also appealed to a second source of revelation, namely the individual human conscience. Hence Barth found that he could agree neither with the supporters nor with the opponents of the encyclical. 'In the long course of my occupation with theology it has become impossible for me to join with Thomas Aquinas in this issue and to progress down his path, upon which your Holiness yourself, as well as friends and critics (not to mention far too many non-Roman Catholics) are moving'. With regret, Barth maintained that, 'neither for my part, can I reconcile this encyclical in this respect to the constitution *Dei Verbum* of the last Council, in which I find no reference to "natural law" nor to "conscience" as sources of revelation'.

Cardinal Cicognani was given the task of responding to Barth on the Pope's behalf. The cardinal did agree with Barth that natural law and conscience are not sources of revelation in the strictest sense ('il est bien évident que la loi naturelle, pas plus que la conscience, ne sont, au sens propre, sources de la Révélation'). However, under appeal to the constitution of the council, *Gaudium et Spes* §16, he objected that it is also undeniable that human beings, on the basis of their conscience, find a law which they have not given to themselves, but before which they find themselves duty-bound.³⁸ Even when

this way of recognising God's will may be often obscured, that is not to say that it radically leads us astray ('radicalement trompeuse').

Barth responded to the cardinal a few days before his death, arguing that in the discussed differences, what one is dealing with 'is no less than the formal and factual question at the base of all Christian, ecclesiological and theological thought and speech, a question which has been considered and discussed in the churches of all confessions, of every land and in every century'.³⁹ On the one hand, he assures the cardinal that he does not want to dispute that nature and conscience 'influence at all times and in all places' the form of the attestation to the revelation of God. Yet he questions, on the other hand: 'Shouldn't we agree that a fundamental difference, not necessarily a contrast, exists between the revelation of God on the one hand, nature and conscience . . . on the other hand?' 'God's revelation is God's own personal word, certainly spoken by him loud and clear in the epiphany of his son'. However, as Ps 19 formulates, nature and conscience speak "'without language, without word, with a voice that we cannot hear"'. Without their elevation by the free grace of God, they are not able to testify to the word of God. He quotes 2 Cor 1:19f: 'In Jesus Christ was . . . not Yes and No, . . . rather that Yes through him [was] also the Amen'. He adds: 'one can say that neither from nature, nor from conscience. In them as such is Yes and No and no Amen'. Therefore, one cannot 'put "nature" and "conscience" on the same level as revelation as "également divine" [equally divine]', as one finds in the cardinal's letter as well as in the papal encyclical and its opponents. Barth continues his penetrating questioning: 'Where in the Holy Text does such an equation occur? Where in the Holy Text is this permitted to the church, or even stipulated?'⁴⁰

With this criticism and these questions Barth made it unmistakably clear that, despite all his respect for the reform movement within Roman Catholicism and despite all his joy over the reception of his work in Catholic theology, in one central point he had held fast and unchanged in his position over the decades. At the beginning of his main work, the *Church Dogmatics*, he describes the phenomenon that meets us in the church of 'another faith', as he calls it. In this other faith, we recognise on the one hand the form of the Christian faith while on the other hand we can only understand it 'as a contradiction of faith'.⁴¹ In a well-thought-out fashion, Barth chooses the concept of 'heresy' for this phenomenon. Following his conviction, we can contemplate this conflict of the faith with itself, the facts of the heresy, in two

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 535.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 536.

⁴¹ CD I/1, 31–2.

³⁷ Barth, *Briefe*, 1961–1968, 501. The following quotes are also taken from this text.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 573, 573f.

forms: (1) 'we stand before the fact of Roman Catholicism in the form which it adopted in the 16th century in the fight against the Reformation'; (2) 'we ourselves stand within the organisational unities of the evangelical churches before the fact of pietistic-rationalistic modernism, with its roots in the mysticism of the middle-ages and the humanistic Renaissance'. Next to this double heresy, as Barth points out, the 'fact of the modern denial of revelation, etc., is quite irrelevant'.⁴²

Barth's dissociation from Roman Catholicism is primarily oriented toward the texts of Thomas Aquinas, the Tridentinum and contemporary Catholic dogmatians. His decisive objection: 'the extent that the concept of the acting God, of that which is radically beyond all human possibilities, is taken seriously [by Roman Catholicism] as the source of dogmatic knowledge, at least in intention'. But the independent and 'self-grounding reality of the divine revelation' – according to the convictions of Roman Catholicism – is supposed to correspond to a supernatural faith. The God who acts outside of all human possibilities does correspond in the end to a human possibility, one which is supposed to be supernatural but which is still a human possibility. Supernatural grace becomes nature, God's activity is transferred to the activity of graced human beings.⁴³ *Analogia entis*, i.e. 'the presence of a divine likeness of the creature even in the fallen world', is the principle over which Barth radically separates himself from Catholicism. Dramatically, he writes in the preface to the first volume of his dogmatics: 'I regard the *analogia entis* as the invention of Antichrist, and I believe that because of it it is impossible ever to become a Roman Catholic, all other reasons for not doing so being to my mind short-sighted and trivial'.

On the basis of the *analogia entis*, Catholic dogmatics does not just allow the activity of God to disappear and be wrapped up within the activity of graced human beings. It transforms that externality of the free activity of God into 'that which is enclosed within the reality of the Church', and the free 'personal act of divine address becomes a constantly available relationship'. One can then talk in principle about this relationship, about 'God and divine things', just as one would about secular facts. Hence the revelation of God becomes harmless, it becomes obscured and altered. Such a distortion and alteration of revelation results when one considers a supernatural faith, a supernatural law or even conscience as 'equally divine'. As we see, Barth remains true to his theological protest.

The conflict with Roman Catholicism is for Barth no end in itself. Barth's occupation with Catholicism since his time in Göttingen is consistently and

closely connected with the attempt to understand better that other heresy – Protestant modernism – and to move against it.⁴⁴ Barth regarded this 'other faith' as even more dangerous, more open to ideological occupation, less capable of being comprehended or taught. His dissociation from Protestant modernism was carried out primarily through his conflicts with Schleiermacher, but also with other theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries within the sphere of influence of idealistic philosophy. What is it that is so problematic and worthy of criticism in modernistic theology and its dogmatics? It sets up 'a nexus of being superior to the being of the Church, and consequently a nexus of scientific problems superior to dogmatics'.⁴⁵ The being of the church is one – among many – determinations of human reality, whether this reality is called 'faithful existence', 'devoutness', or whatever. Then, within the frame of reference of general human reality, the decision will be made regarding what the church and dogmatic statements should be. Outside of the church, the specific conditions of knowledge of Christian theology are to be deduced from the 'general structural laws' of the wide-ranging nexus of being.⁴⁶ Barth's protest is aimed precisely against this seizure of church, theology and dogmatics, against this embrace and against this compulsion to adjustment.

Evangelical theology emphasises both forms of this 'other faith' against the unavailability of the free revelation of God, which remains an unavailable and free divine act in God's turning to humanity. The being of the church is and remains a free divine activity, it neither has roots in an available, transferable, manipulable state, nor does it become such a state. To defend the unavailability of the actions and decisions of God and yet to speak of God – that is the task that evangelical theology sets itself. Based on God's promise, the church awaits the decision of its Lord regarding its speech about God and its actions. Its speech follows in trust upon the spoken word of God and in expectation of the word of God which will confirm that which the church speaks. The church, in its journey 'from the occurred revelation to the promised revelation', orients itself toward this word of God.

Barth explains what this means concretely in dissociation from a modernistic and from a Catholic understanding of proclamation. Modernism levels off the differentiations of the proclamation from the other functions of the church: not only the word, but the actions, the music, the gestures, and so on, are supposed to bear witness to God. Hence the proclamation becomes

⁴⁴ This is the thesis currently under investigation by Lidija Matosevic, one of my doctoral students at the Theological Faculty, Heidelberg.

⁴⁵ CD I/1, 38.

⁴⁶ CD I/1, 36.

⁴² CD I/1, 34.

⁴³ CD I/1, 40f.

one of many expressions of the life of the church, all fundamentally equal in value. But in so doing, the decisive challenge of the church is displaced: 'in relation to God man has constantly to let something be said to him, has constantly to listen to something, which he constantly does not know and which in no circumstances and in no sense can he say to himself'.⁴⁷

The unavailability of God in God's personal stance over and against us and the natural spokenness of the word of God is also stressed by Barth against the Catholic understanding of proclamation. As is well known, the sacrament is pushed here to the centre of the church. Barth concedes that the proclamation results from the sermon as well as the sacrament. It is precisely the sacrament which points to the fact that the word of God is not completely contained within the spoken and heard human word, that God's word is not only truth but 'truth as reality', that 'God's word' is to be 'proclaimed as God's work',⁴⁸ that God acts in his word. Hence, he continues, 'preaching with the sacrament, with the visible act which confirms human speech as God's act, is the constitutive element, the perspicuous centre of the Church's life'.⁴⁹ Hence it must also be said that 'the sacrament [exists] for the sake of preaching, not vice versa'. 'There is surely word without sacrament, but there is never sacrament without word', as Barth – reverting back to a quote from the Reformation tradition – would constantly stress against the Catholicism of his day. The task of sacrament is to confirm, to underline, to concretise and to lead on – but it confirms, underlines, concretises and leads the proclamation of the word on further, which for its part has its basis in the relationship of the speaking God with human beings who find themselves spoken to, in the relationship of the God who calls human beings into question and those human beings who find themselves called to responsibility by God.

The relatively sparse statements about ecumenics in the broader sense which one finds in the *Church Dogmatics* stand in an informative practical-theological connection to this critique of Barth's against the heresy that surfaces in both Roman Catholic and neo-Protestant forms. They also explain Barth's long and rather sceptical position with regard to the ecumenical movement. The most comprehensive treatment that Barth offers on the topic of ecumenics is found on a few pages in the third part of his doctrine of reconciliation in volume IV/3.⁵⁰ He respects the 'conception of the unity of the Churches in the one church of Jesus Christ, and the desire and striving for this unity'. Conceptions and strivings for the unity of the church 'have

not merely been latently present in the modern period from the very outset, but have visibly and palpably increased in strength'.⁵¹ He sees the principal weakness of the ecumenical movement in the continually threatening danger of understanding 'the unity of the church . . . as an end in itself'. This leads to a well-known dilemma: 'either of insisting on loyalty to what for good reasons had been previously accepted and confessed as true Christian faith and order and practice' – the danger here would be that the former rift would be retained; 'or of allowing love and friendliness and tolerance to triumph' for the good of the desired unity – the threat here is 'an unprincipled and featureless relativisation or even the surrender of insights and convictions previously felt and declared to be necessary'.

For Barth, this weakness is overcome by a 'teleological and dynamic' movement to unification, conceived as 'a union which derives from Jesus Christ and is thus union for Him, namely, for the attestation of his work in the world and for the world'.⁵² This difference – unification of the church for the sake of unification and the unification of the church for the sake of a witness understood as coming from Jesus Christ and then directed back to him – is for Barth the standard against which good or problematic ecumenical developments must be measured. He agrees throughout with the overall construction of alliances and worldwide affiliations, and the associated conferences, organisations and reports. He respects these developments, even when he repeatedly sees in them the threat of affiliations being created as ends in themselves. He respects them even when he sees a 'fog of indecision and sterility which envelops . . . all the ecumenical papers so industriously prepared at Bossey and elsewhere', and a lack of clarity about what 'the Church has to proclaim to the disorder of secular politics and economics as the message of salvation'.⁵³ He values in all cases the new ecumenical beginnings, which are also beginnings in that the church responds to the world's turning away from the gospel by turning towards the world and that in this movement of the world in its growing together, the church has taken the lead.⁵⁴

The ecumenical movement and the efforts for the unity of the churches cannot become ends in themselves. The unification of the churches can only be understood as coming 'from Jesus Christ as a unification for him, namely for the attestation of his work in the world and for the world'. This fundamental thought with which Barth became a leading thinker of the ecumenical movement – despite his existence as a minor ecumenical

⁴⁷ CD I/1, 61.

⁴⁸ CD I/1, 60f.

⁴⁹ CD I/1, 70.

⁵⁰ CD IV/3, 35–8.

⁵¹ CD IV/3, 35.

⁵² CD IV/3, 36.

⁵³ CD IV/3, 37.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ibid.* and CD IV/1, 527–8.

figure – is in accordance with the insight with which he moved against Roman Catholicism and Protestant modernism. The true and blessed unification of the church is no end in itself, and neither is it the goal of human plans and efforts. It grows out of a testimony to the revelation of God and is, in the end, a divine gift.

The German ecumenical scholar Harding Meyer once wrote about a discussion he had with Visser't Hooft in 1980, in which he asked him once again about Karl Barth's importance for ecumenics. The great old man of the ecumenical movement, who was not always treated by Barth in a friendly manner, hesitated with his response. Finally he answered: Barth brought an 'anti-triumphalistic' element into the ecumenical movement which was not there at the beginning; he tried to awaken the insight that the church and the unity of the church is above all an 'event'.⁵⁵ To expand upon that thought: an event achieved through God's word and revelation.

A small episode emphasises Visser't Hooft's judgement. As we saw above, during the discussion with Cardinal Bea about natural knowledge of God, Barth's doctor was unable to stop the 80-year-old from expressing his agitation by pounding his fist repeatedly upon the arm of his chair. When even a kick under the table brought nothing, the doctor sided with the cardinal's position. He writes: 'Then Karl Barth looked at me shocked, the discussion came to an end, and we decided to go. The Cardinal accompanied us down to the papal Mercedes 300 and bid us a friendly farewell. Then in the car, Karl Barth said to me: "Now I was really worried that even we two could get into an argument with each other: knowledge of God really is only ever just a grace!" I understood!'

This episode reflects in a simple and charming way what we sought in a rather combative manner to grasp with the subtitle of this paper: from fighter against the 'Roman heresy' to leading thinker for the ecumenical movement.

⁵⁵ Harding Meyer, 'The Importance of Barth's Theology in the Ecumenical Movement', *Dialog* 20 (Winter 1981), 26–30, cf. 28.

The character of Christian realism*

Katherine Sonderegger

Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia 22304, USA KSonderegger@vis.edu

Abstract

This article aims to set out a modest, 'pre-theoretical' or common sense account of metaphysical realism in Christian theology. The essay defends and explores the claim that Christian theology does not rest on definitions or world views when it speaks about 'realism'. Christian realism is not a method, especially not a method spinning free of its proper content, nor a theory about schools of realism. Christian theology is ordered to God's own ways and works: it is a realism in which the God of Israel is both agent and sovereign, both object and subject in the world we inhabit. Christian realism is reflection upon the reality created and blessed by the Creator.

Christian theology is systematic reflection on the reality and reliability of all God's ways and works; for that reason, it is a system of realism. But what do we mean by this little word 'realism'? It is not perhaps so far off our course to remember Luther's own battle over a 'little word': 'is'. 'Is, is, is my body', Luther intoned to Carlstadt, and by that little word he meant to underscore the realism of Christ's presence in the bread of his Supper. Against the 'is' of predication or metaphor, Luther insisted on the 'is of identity': Christ is the bread, which is his body. Luther's 'little word' encases a history of polemics over the 'Real Presence' of Christ in the eucharist; just so our word, 'realism', connotes a chain of polemics about the practice and object of Christian theology. Perhaps again, somewhat like Luther, we may insist on this word – real, real, real – without fully or exhaustively defining or grounding just what Christian reality is. Luther banked on his readers' intuitive understanding of the 'is of identity'. Though fully versed in the most nuanced logic and metaphysics of his day – the *via moderna* of late medieval scholasticism – Luther relied on a rule-of-thumb or 'common-sense' notion of the term 'is'; just so he called upon, but did not delimit, the meaning of the word 'is' in the *Narrative of Institution*. And just so, Christian theology calls upon a rough and ready, 'common-sense' understanding of reality when it begins and carries forward a system of realism.

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