

# BARTH'S THEOLOGY AND PROCESS THEOLOGY

BY MICHAEL WELKER

*"In the following discussion, I will conduct a systematic comparison and ask: (1) What is common to Barth's and Whitehead's thought? (2) In the midst of these commonalities, what separates Barth's theology from Whitehead's theory? (3) How can Barth's theology and process theology mutually challenge and promote each other?"*

**K**ARL Barth never read texts of Whitehead. Moreover, Barth did not refer, either critically or positively, to process theologians, those who have in common that, in their fundamental ideas, they take their orientation more or less strongly from Whitehead's theory. We do find Schubert Ogden mentioned once in Barth's writings. However, he is seen as a Bultmannian and numbered among the "mob of Korah" (Num. 16), as Barth chose to put it.<sup>1</sup>

In Whitehead's work as well, no traces are to be found which would permit one to conclude that Barth's theology, or a way of thinking related to that theology, had exercised any influence on him.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if one returns to the sources and foundations, and inquires after historically verifiable connections and differences, our topic seems to be treated quickly: the findings are negative. Nothing more can be said about the topic.

The situation looks very different, of course, if one does not try to relate one's thoughts back to the sources, the primary texts. Then we encounter a vital need among theologians and other religiously and philosophically interested contemporaries to learn from Barth and from Whitehead. In addition, we find theological and philosophical thinkers and texts which are looking to mediate Barth's theology and process theology, at least from certain points of view. One can find impulses for such procedures particularly in the work of Charles Hartshorne, who

Michael Welker is Professor of Systematic Theology, Tübingen University. He is the author of *Universalität Gottes und Relativität der Welt* (1981) and *Theologie und Funktionale Systemtheorie* (1985). Dr. Welker is one of the few European theologians to make a careful analysis of American process thought.

<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Gesamtausgabe, V. Briefe: 1961–1968*, ed. by Jürgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975), p. 222. Cf. Schubert M. Ogden, *Christ Without Myth: A Study Based On the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 91ff., 131ff.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Michael Welker, *Universalität Gottes und Relativität der Welt: Theologische Kosmologie im Dialog mit dem amerikanischen Prozessdenken nach Whitehead* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), esp. pp. 109ff.

has connected important thoughts of Whitehead with forms of thought of conventional occidental metaphysics.

Several academic works—I emphasize those of John Robertson, Colin Gunton, Sung-Hee Lee, and Robert Shofner<sup>3</sup>—have pointed out places at which the thought of Barth and that of Hartshorne intersect. That, of course, does not remove our initial observation that nothing more can be said about the direct relation between Barth's theology and Whitehead's thought. That is, the possibility is not to be excluded that process theology of the second and third generations has increasingly overlapped with Barth's theology precisely where the former has distanced itself from those forms of thought which are, in the strict sense, characteristic of process theology—namely, the forms which go back to Whitehead's theory—and has fallen back upon other foundations and traditions: for example, Anselm's theology.

A corresponding point is valid with regard to the fact that representatives of process theology as well as of Barthianism have opened themselves to liberation theology and political theology. This commonality does not yet prove a real relation of the respective foundations of process theology and Barthianism. Thus, in the broad field of many possible syncretistic forms, no clear answer is to be found to the question: What connects Barth's theology to and what separates it from process theology? On the level of historical investigation, one does not advance beyond, on the one hand, the negative findings with regard to a relation between the primary texts and, on the other hand, the multi-colored, confusing picture offered by the second and third generations of process theology and Barthianizing theology, which bring in other theologies and forms of thought. On the level of systematic comparison, however, more favorable conditions of departure afford themselves.

In the following discussion, I will conduct a systematic comparison and ask: (1) What is common to Barth's and Whitehead's thought? (2) In the midst of these commonalities, what separates Barth's theology from Whitehead's theory? (3) How can Barth's theology and process theology mutually challenge and promote each other?

## I

On an admittedly quite high level of abstraction, process thinkers and process theologians of the second and third generations have called attention to two basic intentions which Barth and Whitehead undoubtedly share. It is a matter, firstly, of the critical reaction against classical theism and against the old-European metaphysics which articulates and

<sup>3</sup>J. C. Robertson, *The Concept of the Divine Person in the Thought of Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Diss. Yale, 1967); Robert D. Shofner, *Anselm Revisited: A Study of the Role of the Ontological Argument in the Writings of Karl Barth and Charles Hartshorne* (Diss. Leiden, 1974); C. E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); S.-H. Lee, *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis von Anselm von Canterbury: Ein Vergleich zwischen Karl Barths theologischer Interpretation und Charles Hartshornes natürlich-philosophischer Interpretation* (Diss. Tübingen, 1982).

theoretically justifies that theism. Charles Hartshorne and the theologians indebted to his thought have continually given this aspect particular emphasis.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, both Barth and Whitehead are interested in a new realism, as Bernard Meland has clearly seen and repeatedly emphasized. They are seeking a new realism which breaks free "of the enclosure of mentalism which was imposed upon Christian thinking for more than three hundred years and which had shaped the imagery of theological liberalism since the time of Kant."<sup>5</sup>

The first aspect, the criticism of classical theism, has in the meantime become familiar and widespread. It has, in fact, become a new attitude of consciousness for religious thought. Whether criticizing classical theism on the foundation of christology and trinitarian theology, as do Moltmann and Jüngel,<sup>6</sup> or in the name of a neo-classical theism, as do Hartshorne, Ogden, and others, Barthian and process theologians of all directions can quickly come to an amicable understanding with each other.

The second aspect, the common interest of Barth and Whitehead in a new realism, is less apparent and less easy to make convincing. What in Barth's thinking is comparable to the new realism in Whitehead, with its imputation of a pluralistic, polycontextual reality? Where in Barth can one find transformations of the concepts of the concrete and the objective, of subjectivity and reality—transformations which could be even remotely compared with the achievements of Whitehead's cosmology?

In my estimation, one should not allow oneself to be led astray in the investigation of this question by the fact that, in comparison with Whitehead, Barth speaks a language which is more graphic, more plausible for so-called common sense, and which bears the imprint of the symbolism of the biblical tradition. That Barth, in fact, is interested in a "new realism" can be shown with regard to the famous Barth-Harnack controversy of 1923.<sup>7</sup> It can be shown that both theologians talk past each other, because the liberal theologian, Harnack, and the "dialectical" theologian, Barth, base their discussion upon irreconcilable conceptions of "truth to reality" and of "objectivity." Both indeed speak of "truth to reality," of "truth to theological reality," of relation to the object of investigation and of objectivity, but each of them understands something different by those terms. Barth sees in truth to reality and in

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948, 1974); and *Reality as Social Process: Studies in Metaphysics and Religion* (New York: Hafner, 1953, 1971); see also Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 56ff.

<sup>5</sup>B. E. Meland, "The New Realism in Religious Inquiry," *Encounter* 31 (1970), pp. 311ff., 312.

<sup>6</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (München: Kaiser, 1972), esp. pp. 222ff., 236ff., 301ff.; Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1977), pp. 55ff.

<sup>7</sup>In *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, Vol. I, ed. by James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 165ff.

objectivity the respect for and respecting of the fact that that which is thematized in theology and science is not at our disposal, but instead irresistibly imposes and validates itself. If the investigation is true to reality, the object limits and breaks the subjectivity of the observer. It is necessary to regain the recognition of this superior power with regard to the particular truth to reality, the particular object of faith and theology.

Harnack, on the other hand, determines objectivity and truth to reality in terms of dependable, self-critically and methodically controlled communicability, openness to connection with other objects of investigation, and conceivability. If one treats Harnack as representative of the dominant scientific-theological direction of his time, a direction which in turn was dominated by "mentalism," one can in fact say that Barth seeks to validate a new, or in any case other, understanding of reality. Precisely formulated, he seeks to awaken understanding for the fact that God's reality validates itself.

Criticism of conventional theism, breakthrough to a new realism—certainly in this regard one can ascertain common intentions in Barth and Whitehead. However, with the catchwords "criticism of conventional theism" and "effort to achieve a new realism," the commonalities have been established only in negation and in critical reaction against the tradition. In addition, this establishment of commonalities still lies on a high level of abstraction. With the catchwords "criticism of conventional theism" and "effort to achieve a new realism" nothing is yet said about the alternatives which Barth and Whitehead respectively develop. Nothing is yet made out regarding either the constitution of these alternatives or the question of whether they are reconcilable with each other at all. With these catchwords, numerous concerns and forms of thought are not taken into account in which Barth and Whitehead differ or are simply not comparable. Thus, fundamental differences show themselves precisely in the realm of that commonality of Barth's theology and Whitehead's theory as soon as we inquire somewhat more specifically about the introduction and carrying through of Barth's and Whitehead's alternatives to conventional theism and mental realism.

## II

The fundamental differences between Barth's theology and Whitehead's cosmology in the midst of their commonalities can be set forth succinctly. Both indeed criticize conventional theism. However, this criticism occurs in Barth on the basis of trinitarian and christological presuppositions; in Whitehead, in the name of a cosmological principle which he calls "God." Whitehead sees this principle at work in a transformation of reality to higher forms of the harmony which he designates as, among other things, "love."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Cf. *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh, 1927–28. Corrected Edition, ed. D. R. Griffin and D. W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), pp. 343ff. Hereafter cited as PR.

Both Barth and Whitehead are indeed concerned with a new realism. Barth makes use primarily of the forms of thought of dialogical personalism. He shows a special interest in the figure of an I-Thou communication mediated by a hierarchy of authority, and in that communication's difference from a symmetrical I-Thou relationship controlled by interest. By contrast, in Whitehead the effort to achieve a new realism occurs in the framework of a cosmological theory developed over a period of decades, which in its mature form is very complex and accessible only with difficulty.

If one is interested in demarcating and opposing Barth's theology to a theology which builds upon Whitehead's cosmology, if one is even interested in stereotypes of friend and foe, those stereotypes stand comfortably at one's disposal on this level of observation. One can ascertain that Barth's theology, at least according to its intention and claim: (1) is grounded in trinitarian theology; (2) is christologically centered; (3) takes its orientation from biblical theology; (4) is ecclesio-logically functionalized. By contrast, a theology which builds upon Whitehead's cosmology cultivates the following boundary conditions: (1) God is understood as the dynamic unity of a relativistically conceived world; (2) centering occurs on the actual occasion or creature, which is in a "process of concrescence"; (3) orientation occurs in the framework of a cosmology which is formed in terms of a theoretical language; (4) the function is to provide an interdisciplinary, primarily interscientific contact theory, a new type of metaphysics.

The possibilities for placing Barthianizing theologians and process theologians in mutual confrontation are unfathomably rich. For example: *here*, Barthianizing, primary interest in God—*there*, following Whitehead, primary interest in the world; *here*, primary interest in Jesus Christ—*there*, primary interest in the creature or in a theoretical concept of the creature; *here*, primary interest in the "vitality of the biblical witness"—*there*, primary interest in a universalistic theory, which takes account of new developments in the natural sciences; *here*, theology as function of the Christian church and in service to the church—*there*, an undertaking which at most can be called "philosophical theology," and which seems to fit exactly into the pattern of the liberal tradition which Barth criticized so vehemently. From the perspective of process theology, the opposition presents itself thus: *here*, following Whitehead, a theoretical construct which seeks to do justice to the total cultural relevance of the faith, to the meaning of churches for world society, and to the universal scientific responsibility of theology—*there*, following Barth, a way of thinking which has been squeezed into dogmatic cultural forms remote from our own, a way of thinking which is embedded in representations of God which are obsolete or which, for the honest intellect, are impenetrable and incommunicable. And so forth. Such representations of self and other, by self and other, are familiar to us.

One leaves behind this level of long-standing, ritualized, and now fruitless polemic between Barth's theology and so-called liberal theology

as soon as one no longer communicates by means of mere claims and counter-claims, but instead seriously inquires where, at which points, the stereotypes of the “opposite side” do not apply. As soon as one sees one’s conversation partner as following certain identical intentions but in another way, and as soon as one thus asks where, at which points, the conversation partner escapes from the traditional patterns of exclusive demarcation, the conversation begins to become fruitful. One directs attention not to that which separates in a way destructive of commonality, a way which allows only self-justification and self-stabilization over against the other side. Rather, one attains to that which separates in the midst of commonalities.

The assertion that the other side starts not from God, but rather “from the human being,” belongs to the familiar stereotypes of the opposite side which Barth constructed and cultivated. Precisely this picture, though, does not apply to the foundational theory of process theology. Many process theologians would give a great deal to find an anthropological grounding or even an anthropological centering or privileging in Whitehead’s cosmology, instead of being able to speak only about the “series of actual occasions” which we human beings are. If one asks further why Whitehead’s theory does not comply with the clear alternative between starting from God and starting from human beings, one sees that Whitehead’s thought does not at all fit into the dialogical pattern which is so important for Barth. Barth seeks to trace back to I-Thou relations, generally to one-to-one relations, all important theological themes and figures of thought—be it a question of the self-understanding of the triune God, God’s relation to human beings, or interhuman relations. By contrast, Whitehead’s fundamental structures of thought grasp one-to-many and many-to-many relations.

It is idle to argue which of these forms of thought is better or theologically more appropriate. One can set forth dialogical thinking as impressive, highly plausible, and confirmed by many elementary human experiences and by many biblical events. One can disparage dialogical thinking as a primary form of communication of five- to twelve-year-olds—as, for example, Selman and Habermas have impressively suggested. As such, this form of communication is unable to grasp and to make sense of more demanding forms of social order. The structure of this form of communication is superseded in human development.<sup>9</sup> One can emphasize theologically, for example, that dialogical thinking allowed the development of trinitarian theology to become frozen on an unsatisfactory level. In that way, the relation between the one God and the many human beings is grasped only reductionistically, and christological and anthropological orientations are blurred. In short, the stagnation in the development over the past decades of, above all,

<sup>9</sup>Cf. R. L. Selman, *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), esp. pp. 38ff.; and Jürgen Habermas, *Moralbewusstsein und kommunikatives Handeln* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), esp. pp. 144ff., 152ff.

pneumatology and ecclesiology can with good ground be traced back directly to the plausible and apparently so innocently obvious figure of dialogical thinking.

However, the many-to-one and many-to-many figures of process theory are also burdened with theological problems. In contrast to dialogical thinking, they are as yet very difficult to imagine and to render plausible. Whitehead himself must make a great expenditure of theoretical language in order to represent and conceptually control what he sets forth as "reality." Whether this theory-language in individual cases gives rise to fascination or alienation,<sup>10</sup> common sense and the semantic of faith bar themselves as a rule against a direct use of that language. In fact, up to this point that language has not really succeeded in penetrating specifically religious systems of symbols to a degree that would have proved that language superior to dialogical thinking in, for example, the illumination of complex religious states of affairs.

On the one side, we have very plausible dialogical one-to-one relations, which allow for both the inclusion and the exclusion of an anthropological starting point. On the other side, we have one-to-many and many-to-many relations which escape from the conventional picture of "starting from the human being," but which only with difficulty attain the level of the representational world of common sense and of religious systems of symbols. Once again, we seem to have indeed emerged from the field of conflict, but at the price of falling into a situation of simple irreconcilability.

This impression changes when one considers the theory of religion and religious development which Whitehead develops in *Religion in the Making*. There Whitehead describes the development of high religions as a central factor in the cultural process in which the individual is increasingly freed from being bound to the immediate environment in order to gain an increasingly extensive circle of experience and operation. In very archaic rituals, the agents renounce actions which have "direct relevance to the preservation of [their] physical organisms."<sup>11</sup> The agents accept an at least partial and temporary distancing and alienation from their direct natural environment in order to gain a more extensive social environment. Whitehead is persuaded, though, that the bonds of "social routine" are also partly dissolved by higher religions in order to gain more extensive reference to the world-today, for example, through communication by means of mass media. In this process, solitariness and disclosure of the world are simultaneously heightened. Something occurs simultaneously which at first seems counter-intuitive: we become increasingly solitary and yet expand the realm of our

<sup>10</sup>I have discussed the reasons for and problems of the development of a theory-language in Hegel and Whitehead: "Why Develop a Universal Theory?" in *Hegel and Whitehead: Contemporary Perspectives on Systematic Philosophy*, ed. George R. Lucas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), pp. 121ff.

<sup>11</sup>A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 20. Hereafter cited as *RM*.

experience and influence. Our experience becomes simultaneously more abstract and more concrete.

According to Whitehead, the high religions stimulate precisely this process. Thus, the central determinations of religion in Whitehead's book *Religion in the Making* are in no way contradictory. Rather, they describe the development's field of tension. Those central determinations are as follows: (1) "Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness";<sup>12</sup> (2) "Religion is world-loyalty."<sup>13</sup> Whitehead is persuaded that high religions establish a field of tension which serves the covariant heightening of both the experience of solitariness and the formation of consciousness of the world.

It is of the greatest importance to see that this field of tension is not established simply by means of a pressure toward abstraction and generalization. Although, according to Whitehead's persuasion, all highly developed religions move toward a rationalistic metaphysics which "endeavors to express the most general concepts adequate for the all-inclusive universe,"<sup>14</sup> it is neither possible nor permissible for attitudes of religious consciousness and theologies to be either identified with or "aufgehoben" in a metaphysics. For example, the Christian religion cultivates the field of tension between experience of solitariness and consciousness of the world by emphasizing a number of fundamental facts and experiences in sensually plausible "first-hand intuition," which at the same time open the way for claims to ultimate truth and unconditional obligation. Admittedly, it is only vaguely that Whitehead points to such, as he says, fundamental facts. He points out that the "reported sayings of Christ are not formularized thought. They are descriptions of direct insight. . . . His sayings are actions and not adjustments of concepts. He speaks in the lowest abstractions that language is capable of."<sup>15</sup> The clearest determinations of the "tremendous fact" exhibited by the gospel<sup>16</sup> occur for Whitehead with regard to Christ's experience of solitariness on the cross and the divine realization of a universal harmony without physical compulsion, purely through the power of loving persuasion. In addition, in *Religion in the Making* Whitehead put forward the notion of solitariness as a basis fact common to all high religions: "The great religious conceptions which haunt the imaginations of civilized mankind are scenes of solitariness: Prometheus chained to his rock, Mahomet brooding in the desert, the meditations of the Buddha, the solitary man on the Cross. It belongs to the depth of the religious spirit to have felt forsaken, even by God."<sup>17</sup>

At this point, I should not yet like to direct attention to those considerations in order to discuss whether or not Whitehead's interest in

<sup>12</sup>*RM*, p. 16; cf. pp. 47, 58.

<sup>13</sup>*RM*, p. 59; cf. pp. 39ff.

<sup>14</sup>*RM*, p. 81.

<sup>15</sup>*RM*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup>*RM*, p. 51.

<sup>17</sup>*RM*, p. 19.

the covariance of processes of individuation and universalization correspond to genuinely religious thought. I should also not like to undertake considerations as to whether Whitehead has grasped the central facts of the Christian religion with sufficient sharpness, or even with rough accuracy. At this point, it is more important to me to emphasize Whitehead's conviction that religiousness is necessarily bound to a selection from facts of lived experience and from direct experiences. "Religions commit suicide when they find their inspirations in their dogmas. The inspiration of religion lies in the history of religion. By this I mean that it is to be found in the primary expressions of the intuitions of the finest types of religious lives."<sup>18</sup> This necessary foundation of religion in a selection of concrete facts and experiences does not, of course, exclude processes of rationalization and dogmatization. On the contrary. "But dogmatic expression is necessary. For whatever has objective validity is capable of partial expression in terms of abstract concepts, so that a coherent doctrine arises which elucidates the world beyond the locus of the origin of the dogmas in question."<sup>19</sup> At this point, Whitehead localizes the function of theology, which he compares with the function of the natural sciences.<sup>20</sup> Theologies have to bring those primary facts into a coherent relation, and that means on a certain level of abstraction and in a system of conceptual reference. A dogma is simply "the expression of a fact as it appears within a certain sphere of thought."<sup>21</sup>

On this level, one has sufficient grounds for discussing and coming to an understanding as to whether Whitehead's or Barth's selection of the central facts and the system of reference which allows for dogmatization is more appropriate to the Judeo-Christian tradition to which both of them refer. Yet, in addition, one should remember that Whitehead himself is primarily interested in a further process of generalization which follows upon dogmatization. The longest, most important, and most influential parts of his mature theory concentrate on this further step: the transition from dogmatic systems to a new type of metaphysics.

In order to emerge from imprisonment in the usual field of conflict between Barth's theology and liberal theology, Barthian theology and process theology, one must clearly differentiate two tasks. One is the task which Whitehead ascribes to theologies as well as to natural sciences; the other, the task which he assigns to metaphysics. Whitehead is persuaded that theologies and natural sciences move in the realm of tension between facts, concrete experiences, and their dogmatization. Theology and natural sciences are differentiated through selection, generalization, and systematization of facts and concrete experiences.

<sup>18</sup> *RM*, p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> *RM*, p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *RM*, p. 136 *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> *RM*, p. 125.

By contrast, Whitehead understands by “‘metaphysics’ . . . the science which seeks to discover the general ideas which are indispensably relevant to the analysis of everything that happens.”<sup>22</sup>

It would be simplistic and would lead back into premodern forms of thought if one wanted to regard the task of metaphysics as “higher” over against theologies and natural sciences, and wanted to work at all with thoughts of one surpassing the other. The heightened power of generalization which is proper to metaphysics is bought at a price: namely, metaphysics lives and experiences “second-hand,” so to speak. Whitehead is convinced that a metaphysics today can be established only as a contact theory aiming at universal understanding.<sup>23</sup> A metaphysics is formed with regard to several (by tendency, all) systematized or dogmatized contexts of experience. Metaphysics understands itself as systematization of systematizations. Since the latter must themselves be continually examined for accordance with experience and in given cases revised, metaphysics is, in principle, subject to a permanent process of revision. Likewise, metaphysics is subject to a permanent criticism of its abstraction. Metaphysics does not tell reality how the latter is constituted. Metaphysics is not the queen of the sciences, but rather their center for understanding, their interface.

One can argue whether this theory, which reacts to the modern differentiation of the systems of reference of empirical sciences, should still be called “metaphysics” at all. Whitehead himself spoke as a rule not of metaphysics but of *a* metaphysics, and left little doubt regarding his differences from Aristotelian thought.<sup>24</sup>

It can be clearly seen that, according to Whitehead’s conviction and in opposition to many who would like to appeal to Whitehead, a metaphysical theology without further determination is a contradiction in terms. Although a metaphysics of the Whiteheadian type will naturally also attempt to give a systematic place to the idea of God, such a metaphysics cannot understand itself as a theology or as the latter’s equivalent. A “process theology” which appeals to Whitehead’s theory and wishes to work with his forms of thought should not blur this difference. It is this type of metaphysics which not only differentiates Whitehead’s theory from conventional forms of thought, but also makes a fruitful exchange between Barth’s theology and process theology in principle conceivable and possible.

### III

A metaphysics, as comprehended by Whitehead, certainly can and will proceed from a determinate scientific or dogmatic system of

<sup>22</sup>*RM*, p. 82.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. Welker, *op. cit.* (see footnote 10).

<sup>24</sup>In this context, Whitehead’s criticism of the theoretical centering on the subject-predicate structure should be emphasized, also his questioning of the methodical privilege natural language enjoys, his replacement of the conception of matter by that of creativity, his transformation of the theory of the subject, his development of a theory of “perishing” as opposed to a theory of “becoming,” etc.

reference. A metaphysics can have its origin and its home in, for example, a theological dogmatics or a particular natural science. However, the immediate stabilization and cultivation of the system of reference from which a metaphysics proceeds does not belong to its tasks. Rather, a metaphysics alienates itself from that system of reference insofar as a metaphysics does not have direct recourse to the concrete facts and experiences which ground that system. Instead, a metaphysics has recourse to those aspects of the fundamental facts and to those formations of the system of reference which can also be discovered in other dogmatics and other scientific systematizations.

One should not understand this being geared to high-level abstraction and universal structures as an interest in a transformation and unification of specific systematic complexes, of specific dogmatics, of specific systems of symbols. On the contrary. For the more clearly the specific systems of symbols are delineated and the more sharply the specific dogmatics are formulated, the greater not only the challenges but also the chances of development for a metaphysics. The more clearly the specific systems of symbols are presented, the richer, on the one hand, the foundational material on which a metaphysics can fall back, and the smaller, on the other hand, the danger of abstractive distortion and trivializing—a danger to which every metaphysics is subject.

The cultivation of a specific system of symbols—less abstractly formulated, the cultivation of a dogmatics grounded in trinitarian theology, christologically centered, taking its orientation from biblical theology, and ecclesiologically functionalized—is precisely the concern of the theology of Karl Barth. It is characteristic of Barth's theology and of all those who legitimately declare themselves obligated to his thought, stubbornly to defend and to preserve this concern against all philosophical and other conceptual supercessions and relativizations of the dogmatic-theological system of reference. Barth saw clearly that supposed supercessions and relativizations of the system of reference of theological dogmatics threaten on two fronts. Firstly, they can occur in the name of a higher level of generalization, in the framework, for example, of a metaphysics, a philosophy, or theory of culture—or even a systems theory. As we could show, however, an interest of this type in supercession and relativization is not present in Whitehead. His metaphysics does not claim to replace or even to correct theological work. His metaphysics consciously pursues another task on another terrain.

Relativizations of the work of theological dogmatics can, however, also occur on the level of concretion, through new determinations and assumptions regarding the facts and experiences central for religiousness and theology. At this point, one will indeed have to ask whether Whitehead, with his notion of solitariness and his interest in the covariant heightening of processes of individuation and universalization, has not underdetermined the relevant facts of religion in general and the Christian tradition in particular. In my estimation, everything speaks for the view that, with those determinations, Whitehead has offered a systematic reformulation of the central experiences of the Wisdom texts.

However, this systematization is insufficient for the comprehension and accurate rendering of the traditions which are most important for Christian theology, insufficient especially for the determination of the “tremendous fact” exhibited by the Gospels. Here, too, a theology, which follows Barth, has to challenge those who wish to make use of Whitehead’s thought.

Does that mean that a theology which follows Barth should assert the validity of his basic figure of dialogical personalism over against the theology which follows Whitehead? Should the theology which follows Barth in addition appropriate the interest, characteristic of Barth’s thought, in a theological hierarchy of power between God and “human being”—a hierarchy whose validity Barth frequently seeks to assert by means of ideas of spatial and temporal priority?

It can easily be shown that dialogistic thinking, religiously presupposed without question, as well as the religious interest in the power code, are precisely the points at which Whitehead’s thought reacts allergically to Christian theology. Over against the dialogical point of departure, Whitehead denied that religion is essentially a social phenomenon. It is only in a “primitive phase of religion, dominated by ritual and emotion, [that] we are dealing with essentially social phenomena. . . . Conversely, religion in its decay sinks back into sociability.”<sup>25</sup> Over against the interest in a theological hierarchy of power—an interest so strongly imprinted upon the first volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*—Whitehead emphasized over and over: “The worship of glory arising from power is not only dangerous: it arises from a barbaric conception of God.”<sup>26</sup>

In light of the theology of Karl Barth, one will have to test and, I think, correct both reservations. One will have to ask whether and how the facts of religious experience observed by Whitehead are to be brought together with God’s communication with “human beings,” a communication to which Barth gave central position. Further, how are Whitehead’s observations to be brought together with the communication of faith and with the thoroughly nonbarbaric “[demonstrations] of the Spirit and of power” of which the Christian complex of symbols speaks. In this regard, Barth’s theology can offer a manifold challenge and stimulation for process theology. However, it is not a question of a one-sided challenge of the form which would, on the one hand, enable one to assign to Barth’s theology, on the basis of its material appropriateness and competence, the care of the specifically Christian system of symbols, and which would, on the other hand, require one either to “Barthianize” process theology or to deport it into the realm of competence of metaphysical theory formation.

Instead, the forms of thought which Whitehead developed, and which encounter us today in different variants in culturally influential theories,

<sup>25</sup>*RM*, pp. 22, 23.

<sup>26</sup>*RM*, p. 54; cf. pp. 54f., 148; *PR*, pp. 342ff.

call into question the means by which Barth emphasized the sociality of religious life, a sociality which is, in fact, foundational for Christian faith and Christian theology. One will have to examine whether the dialogical relation has in fact been adequate as the basic theological figure. One will have to examine whether the I-Thou correlation has in fact been the adequate figure for formulating the doctrine of the Trinity, ecclesiology, anthropology, and even covenant theology. One will have to examine whether the more complex "one-to-many" and "many-to-many" structures, to which the best thinkers of liberal theology gave high-level development as early as the previous century, should not be newly validated in a genuinely theological system of reference.<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Whitehead's theory and process theology could offer numerous challenges and impulses for thought to a Barthianizing theology.

It is significant to see that Barth himself, above all in his later work, sought to further develop and to supersede his own popularized dialogical forms of thought in precisely that direction. The strongest contributions which Barth himself has to make in this respect are to be found in his magnificent new approach to christology in the *Church Dogmatics* doctrine of reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> There Barth undertakes a transformation of conventional theological dogmatics which thoroughly corresponds to Whitehead's requirement that theology begin with facts and first-hand experiences. Barth emphasizes that the meaning of true deity "cannot be gathered from any notion of supreme, absolute, non-worldly being. It can be learned only from what took place in Christ."<sup>29</sup>

Barth saw clearly the relative strangeness, even the harshness of this theological thinking which has its point of departure in concrete facts. Again and again, he emphasized that to dare to speak of God's identity with this "man who was born like all of us in time, who lived and thought and spoke, who could be tempted and suffer and die and who was in fact tempted, and suffered and died" is "something very bold and profoundly astonishing."<sup>30</sup>

Yet Barth continually emphasizes the fact that it is the center of the Christian faith and the point of Christian theology to cling to and to impress upon its hearers the following truth: "Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed Himself and His nature, the essence of the divine."<sup>31</sup> That assertion precisely does not raise claims to speak of a "God" who could be ascertained in all conceivable systems of reference.

In critical distancing from his own tendencies in his early work, Barth

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Michael Welker, "F. D. E. Schleiermacher: Universalisierung von Humanität," in *Grundprobleme der großen Philosophen*, Philosophie der Neuzeit III, ed. Josef Speck (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 9ff., esp. pp. 15ff.

<sup>28</sup>*Church Dogmatics*, Vol. IV, Pt. 1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956). Hereafter cited as *CD*.

<sup>29</sup>*CD* IV/1, p. 177.

<sup>30</sup>*CD* IV/1, p. 183.

<sup>31</sup>*CD* IV/1, p. 186.

steadfastly warns Christian theology against centering on an “abstract God” and an “abstract human being.” It is in Christ that God becomes “a creature, man, flesh, that he enters into our being in contradiction. . . . If we think that this is impossible, it is because our concept of God is too narrow, too arbitrary, too human—far too human.”<sup>32</sup>

In this concentration on the “tremendous fact” exhibited by the Gospels, a point of convergence, a starting point of understanding between Barth’s theology and process theology could be determined. If one begins with the situation described at the outset, a situation of conflict, incompatibility, and confusion, much is attained with the determination of such a point of convergence.

Little enough seems accomplished, however, if one inquires after the more precise dogmatic and systematic determination of this fact, if one inquires after appropriate generalizations and concretizations, which do not lead to an abstract God, but to Christ’s presence in the Spirit. Little seems attained if one asks how the basic dialogical figures and the assumption of the religious centrality of the experience of solitariness could be altered in the exchange of ideas between Barth’s theology and process theology. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the fact that we have moved from irreconcilability and the exchange of criticism and pretensions to the level on which theologies connected with Barth and process theology can develop common, theological-systematic and materially important questions.

Still more is accomplished, though, than merely pointing to a possible common point at which to begin conversation and to certain fields of tension of common questions. A regress into the old difficulties of understanding and conflicts can be prevented by the grounded differentiation of, on the one hand, theological work and, on the other hand, a type of metaphysics which Whitehead has altered and adapted to the development of modernity. It was the uncontrolled mixing up and mistaking of theological and metaphysical tasks which led to some strange theological phenomena and to terrible stereotypes of the “opposite side”: in the Barthians, intolerant pretensions to universality and, at the same time, dogmatic narrowness;<sup>33</sup> in the process theologians, monsters of theoretical language given out as theology, soteriologically powerless and ecclesologically incommunicable.<sup>34</sup> Such distortions should belong to the past.

Certainly Barth is primarily interested in the concrete grounding of faith, in more cultivated and richer complexes of theological symbols, in

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup>Above all, the insufficient reception of Barth’s so-called “critique of religion” has had an ill effect. Cf. even the more subtle interpretations by B. E. Meland, *The Realities of Faith: The Revolution in Cultural Forms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 302ff.; D. D. Williams, “The New Theological Situation,” *Theology Today* 24 (1968), pp. 444ff., esp. pp. 449ff.; and John B. Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 49; and compare them with § 17 of *CD*.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. the much more far-reaching criticism in C. E. Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, pp. 220ff., esp. p. 223 (see footnote 3).

soteriological power, and in enabling in the community of faith communicability of the contents of faith. By contrast, Whitehead and many process theologians are primarily interested in developing and having at their disposal a theory which inquires after analogies to important forms of the Christian faith in other systems of symbols: religious, scientific, general cultural. The two tasks are most certainly not to be simply identified. Yet both tasks are requisite to the inner and outer orientation of faith. Only the adoption of both tasks characterizes a realistic theology which is responsibly related to the world.