

Is Karl Barth's Christocentrism a valid Christian way of theological thinking?

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There is a certain analogy between Barth's Christocentrism and ecclesiastically dominated medieval society. The latter came about as the result of a double movement. First, largely due to the apologists, the Church as the covenant People of God was *reduced* to the cultic functions of the People of God. The cultic functionaries became the core of the Church while the majority of the People of God were demoted to being laity. Gradually the powers of the cultic functionaries increased to the extent that they came to claim the right to rule the whole of society. However, this *expansion* of clerical authority did not correct the original reduction but rather presupposed it and sought to 'improve' it. It failed to break with the underlying dualism of sacred-secular (or grace-nature). While the ecclesiastical domination of society gave the appearance of the total 'Christianisation' of human life and thought, in reality only an external conformity was achieved. Indeed, the whole scheme presupposed the autonomy of 'natural' human life. Aquinas regarded the conclusions of 'natural' reason – principally of pagan Aristotle – as in need of little correction for the direction of the 'natural' life of man e. g. logic, physics and the sciences, economics, ethics, politics, and natural theology.¹ Our analogy with Barth is that his Christocentrism while it appears to give emphatic pre-eminence to Christ actually and tragically detracts from his renewing regime. Just as medieval Caesaro-papism lost the New Testament vision of the nature and task of the People of God and consequently legitimated the partial secularisation of the life of Western society, so Barth's Christocentrism, perhaps despite his best intentions, has precisely the same effect. The principal reason for this is that his 'Christocentrism' and his theological method are rooted in the same *nature-grace ground-motive* that precluded medieval thought from taking with full seriousness the Biblical ground-motive of *creation, fall and redemption in Jesus Christ in the communion of the Spirit*.²

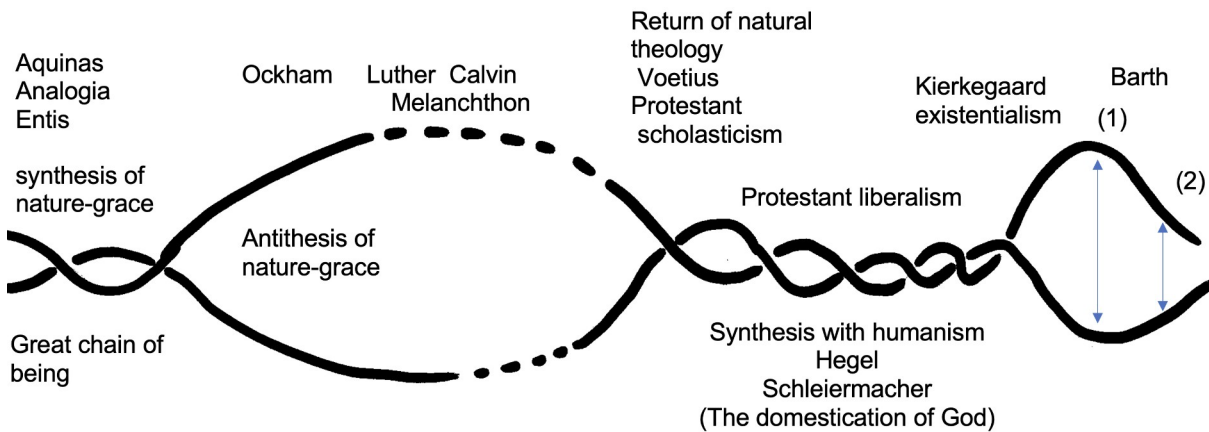
My first main point, then, is that despite all his fulmination against Roman Catholicism, Barth is in fact fundamentally a *neo-scholastic* rather than a neo-Calvinist as he is regarded by many. (He betrays some of the best insights of the Reformation and perpetuates some of the crucial features of the medieval heritage which the Reformers failed fully to reform in the light of the Scriptures). By scholastic I mean that the medieval nature-grace ground-motive dominates Barth's thought. The qualification neo- is intended to signify the further modification occasioned by the modern humanist ground-motive of nature-freedom (or more fully the humanist ideals of science and personality). Both of these ground-motives with which Barth synthesises the Christian faith are dialectical in character. The two poles simultaneously presuppose and exclude each other and consequently provide a fundamentally unstable foundation on which to build. Such a complex synthesis is thence pervaded by antinomies, ambiguities and obscurities. Attempts at consistent exposition are dogged by the fact that the conclusions seem to contradict what appears to be clearly

1 On this disastrous history of the Church which lies behind so many of our present problems see John Van Dyk's "From Deformation to Reformation" and Hendrik Hart's "Cultus and Covenant" in Olthuis, J. *et al.* (ed.) *Will All the King's Men: Out of Concern for the Church. Phase II*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972.

2 The distinctions with which I am working here come from the Dutch Christian philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd and are easily accessible in his *Roots of Western Culture, Pagan, Secular and Christian Options*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979 and in L. Kalsbeek's *Contours of a Christian Philosophy: An introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd's Thought*. Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1975.

stated elsewhere by Barth.³ Barth tries to hold it all together by insisting that no one has the right to criticise him unless they have read the whole *Church Dogmatics*.

The following diagram attempts to sketch some of the main components of the Barthian synthesis:



1. We wish to underline a parallelism of development between the breakdown of the medieval synthesis, the critique of the synthesis by Ockham and the subsequent emergence of Protestant scholasticism, with the breakdown of the liberal Protestant synthesis, the critique of it by Kierkegaard and the Barth of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922) and the subsequent emergence of a far less anti-synthetic mentality in the *Church Dogmatics* (1932 onwards).

(a) The common background in both cases is one of cultural optimism, a confidence in the essential rationality of God, humankind and the world. For Aquinas a pre-eminently rational God made a rational world which humanity by the natural light of reason can rightly understand. To the extent that anything is real it is rational. Although the ‘realms’ of nature and grace are distinguished, Aquinas is emphatic that though revelation and faith go beyond reason they do not contradict it; that ‘grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.’⁴ The modern parallel is the humanistic optimism of eighteenth and nineteenth century liberal theology expressed in titles such as Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793). It is perhaps Hegel’s attempt to ‘rationally’ overcome all oppositions between God, humanity, and world by means of his dialectical logic that presents the clearest parallel.

(b) In both cases this cultural confidence is followed by cultural despair. In the fourteenth century came the Black Death which wiped out one third of the population of Europe. The art of the period became preoccupied with death and judgment. Nature and grace are no longer regarded as continuous. The link of natural theology between humanity and God is rejected by Ockham, as is any suggestion that humanity can naturally find God within its own consciousness as the Platonic-

3 This not a failure in intellectual power or clarity but an inevitable consequence of attempting to produce some sort of synthesis out of the antithesis of divergent religious ground-motives. At one level Barth recognises the failure of all attempts to synthesise Christianity with pagan or humanistic thought, but lacking a radical alternative remains caught up in the dialectics of the nature-grace ground-motive and tries to make the best of his situation.

4 *Summa Theologica* Q1, Art. 8, Reply obj. 2.

Augustinian tradition had maintained. Indeed 'natural reason' is now also radically restricted even with respect to the natural world. It can no longer intellectually abstract universals from sensed objects for there are no universals external to humanity – in the world itself or God. 'Universals' are merely names that we give to similar objects hence the characterisation as nominalism or terminism. This in turn introduces the problem of induction. Namely, how can we go from our limited experience to claims about universal laws with some guarantee of an underlying order? Consequently, one can have no 'rational anticipations' as to what God might do in the realms of nature or grace. All one has are the 'positive facts' of nature and revelation which simply and contingently are what they are. God is no longer the pure Form rational God of Aquinas, but the transcendent free God whose actions cannot but appear arbitrary to human reflection. In this new context faith is no longer humanity's (= rational animal's) intellectual assent to the teachings of the Church but an act of will and trust in what is revealed. Not rational assent but blind commitment... along the lines of Abraham or Job.

The 20th century has been in many ways a secularised version of this 14th century 'age of anxiety.' The carnage, devastation, extent and senselessness of the First World War shocked Barth out of its previously held theological liberalism which was a kind of religious socialism. Will Herberg (1901-1977) describes Barth's new orientation of the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* (1922) as follows:

What, in essence, was it that Barth said which so startled Christendom in the years following the first world war? It was the word of divine sovereignty and transcendence. This Word was directed first against the dominant liberalism, which saw the divine in immanent continuity with the 'best' and the 'highest' in man's spirit and culture, so that talking about God did indeed become, as Barth was later to comment so caustically, "talking about man in a loud voice." But it was also directed against the so-called "mediating" theology which tried to get away from liberalism and yet preserve the bond between immanence and transcendence by linking the two together and blurring the distinction between them. Against both the liberals and the mediators, Barth insisted on the Kierkegaardian "infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity, between God and man." God is to be reached not by mounting upward from nature, man and culture to the divine; God is to be known only through his self-disclosure in his Word. The chasm between God and man that man, from his side and through his own efforts, cannot possibly bridge God can and does – in his judgment and his grace. God comes to us *senkrecht von oben* – "straight down (perpendicularly) from above" – and creates his own "point of contact" with us for in us there is nothing that we can count on as a point of contact with the divine. Even Emil Brunner, who shared Barth's general orientation but saw some point of contact in men's "capacity for the word," fell foul of Barth's uncompromising criticism at this time. The God of whom the Bible bears witness, Barth insists again and again, is a God who is "wholly other" (*ganz anders, totaliter aliter*) and who comes to us from "above" to shatter and transform all our enterprises.⁵

5 *Community, State and Church: Three essays by Karl Barth*. Introduction by Will Herberg. New York: Anchor Books, 1960, pp. 15-16.

In terms of our diagram, we move from positions (1) to (2), from the continuity of nature and grace, to their maximal discontinuity. However, within this dialectical ground-motive, the transcendence of God tends to be purchased at the price of his relevance. If all human culture is under judgement, then there is little room for discrimination between cultural ideals. For none of them can be 'Christian' or even more Christian than others. In the case of both Ockham-Luther and Kierkegaard-Barth (*The Epistle to the Romans* 2nd edn) relations it is noticeable that the relative indifference to culture, indeed the critique of culture, was predicated upon a determined *individualism*. For each of them, the relation of the Individual to God is the dominating interest which serves to eclipse all other interests. Both Ockham and Kierkegaard engaged in attacks upon synthetic Christendom, and both sought to disengage faith from culture, something which deeply influenced Luther and Barth.

(b) We now turn to the final phase, in which the antithetical relation of nature and grace becomes increasingly muted and begins to move once again toward synthesis. Here too, there is a certain parallelism for the historical context. When the Lutheran Reformation ceased to be a protest movement against mediaeval Catholicism and came to undertake the latter's responsibility for culture (family, states, economy, education, the arts, *et cetera*) it rapidly fell back into a synthetic mentality, the final results of which are rightly designated *Lutheran scholasticism*. In Luther himself one finds all the ambivalence which the nature-grace ground-motive inevitably generates. At times he scorns philosophy as "...that devil's dung... from which all I can do is purge myself," echoing Tertullian's *rejection* of philosophy. More authentically to the biblical spirit of the Reformation at times he glimpses the possibility of a Christian reformation of philosophy, as when he writes:

I believe it impossible that the church should be reformed without completely eradicating canons, decretals, scholastic theology, philosophy, and logic, as they are now received and taught and instituting others in their place.⁶

Luther entrusted Philipp Melanchthon with the reformation of philosophy and German education. No new philosophy was forthcoming, and so Melanchthon with Luther's compliance, turned once again to Aristotle, as had Aquinas, for the direction of human thought, not only in the 'natural' sciences but eventually in theology also. Melanchthon wrote:

A kind of philosophy must be chosen which has the least sophistry and keeps a just method; such is the thinking of Aristotle... We cannot dispense with the monuments of Aristotle. I plainly feel that great confusion of doctrine will follow if Aristotle is neglected, who is the one and only constructor of method; although he who takes Aristotle as his principal guide and seeks a simple and unsophisticated doctrine can also take something now and then from other authors.⁷

The historian of philosophy described the consequences of Melanchthon's synthesis as follows:

... he gradually brought back into the body of a Lutheran teaching... much of the intellectual system of the Schoolmen and much of the ethical spirit of the Humanists. As *preceptor Germaniae* he organised Protestant education along humanistic lines; he

6 *Epist.* vol 1 p. 54 (ed. De Wette) quoted by F. Ueberweg *A History of Philosophy*, 4th edn. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, vol. 2, pp. 16-17.

7 *Corpus Reformatorum* XI p. 282, XIII p. 656, quoted by J. H. Randall, *The Career of Philosophy*. 1. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1970, vol. 1, p. 114.

reinstated the idea of natural law, which Luther had opposed to the gospel; he set natural theology once more beside revealed theology; and he crowned the educational ladder with a systematic philosophy. But it was not the Platonism of the Renaissance, nor any of its Augustinian variants that he employed to consolidate the intellectual life of Lutheranism; it was Aristotle as the Humanists understood him, with a strong Stoic and Ciceronian admixture in ethics. And for century and a half the Protestant universities in the Germanies were given over to a sterile Aristotelianism that shut them off for all contact with the currents of modern philosophy or the rising tide of natural science.⁸

The parallel I wish to draw with Barth's softening of the nature-grace antithesis is particularly connected with the rise of National Socialism, which coincided with the time that Barth had begun to produce his *Church Dogmatics* (1932 onwards). During this time, until the termination of World War Two, Barth progressively articulated a positive theology of the state, in direct opposition to the Nazi regime about which he could not remain responsibly silent. Indeed, one can detect a significant shift in Barth's thinking from (b) to (c), from judgement to grace, from theological agnosticism to theological positivism.

In phase (b) Barth writes: "God is pure negation." "God must never be identified with anything we can name, or conceive, or worship." "We who stand in this (human) world know nothing, are incapable of knowing anything of that other (divine) world."⁹ The Divine *No!* condemns both the existing social order with the social conservatism which supports it for "the existing order as such is the evil"¹⁰ but also the social radicalism which seeks to destroy it. In fact, maintains Barth "... the revolutionary is more overcome of evil than the conservative, because with his 'No', he stands so strangely nearer to God."¹¹ From the ultimate perspective of phase (b) social and political questions lose their real seriousness for the Christian. This meant that Barth saw political activity as theologically (Christianly) tolerable only when is carried on as "...essentially a game; that is to say, we are unable to speak of absolute political right... and when room has perhaps been made for that relative moderateness or for that relative radicalism in which the human possibilities are renounced."¹² Whatever plausibility such a maxim may have in a settled society based on law is lost where the game may be terminated by a Nazi or Communist revolution.

At first Barth's opposition to National Socialism was entirely based on the interference of the new regime in church affairs and the theological corruption it was attempting to introduce into the life of the church. After his expulsion from Germany and upon his return to Switzerland, this limited critique was greatly expanded. He begins to develop a new doctrine about the 'righteous' state which hinges upon a correspondence between what is 'above' with what is 'below,' between the 'heavenly *polis*' and the 'earthly *polis*.'¹³ The state, Barth insists, must be seen "as an allegory, as a correspondence and an analogue to the Kingdom of God which the Church preaches and believes

8 *Op. cit.* vol 1, p. 114.

9 *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 422, 331, 30 cited by Herberg, p. 19n.

10 *Op. cit.* p. 479, cited by Herberg p. 22.

11 *Op. cit.* p. 480, Herberg, p. 22.

12 *Op. cit.* p. 489. Herberg pp. 23-24.

13 "Church and State" in *op. cit.* p. 135.

in”;¹⁴ indeed it is the Kingdom of God in “an external, relative, and provisional embodiment.”¹⁵ Political action is to be guided by this criterion: “Among political possibilities open at any particular moment, it (the church) will choose those which most suggest a correspondence to an analogy and a reflection of the content of its own faith and the gospel.” Ostensibly refusing to base the state on the doctrine of *creation* (and natural law) or of the *fall* (in the Augustinian-Reformed manner) Barth has no choice but to relate its necessity to the order of *redemption* and to find a Christological justification. Consequently he tries to argue by analogy from the doctrine of the church to that of the proper character of the state. In criticism Emil Brunner points out against Barth that “... anything and everything can be derived from the same principle of analogy: a monarchy just as well as a republic (Christ the King), a totalitarian state just as much as a state with civil liberties (Christ the Lord of all, man as servant, indeed a slave, of Jesus Christ).”¹⁶ In further criticism Will Herberg asks:

Is it possible to doubt that what Barth is really doing is adjusting his “Christological” arguments to conclusions *already* reached *on other grounds*? In other words, Barth takes the values of a pluralistic constitutional democracy as given, ingeniously discovers more or less plausible counterparts for them in the realm of the church and Gospel, and then proceed to “derive” the former from the latter. A procedure neither plausible nor particularly fruitful, it would seem.¹⁷

This short excursion into some features of the history of western theology and Barth’s political thought is intended to indicate the power of the nature-grace ground-motive and some of the variety of ways in which the two poles can be related to each other, and how the shifting relations introduce all sorts of anomalies and tensions into theological thought. We shall now turn in more detail to Barth’s own characterization of his theological method in his *Church Dogmatics*. Our two focuses will be (1) the nature of the discipline of theology and (2) Barth’s Christocentrism.

(1) T.F. Torrance in *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910-31* describes the intention of Barth’s theology in the following terms:

The function of theology therefore, as Barth sees it is that of *service* to God’s word i.e. service of Jesus Christ. It is theology that will only *serve* the concrete active form of the Truth in the Incarnation of the Word, so that every point must be brought into relation with that truth in severe critical testing. Theology of this kind that insists on following the word of God, that serves its interpretation, that derives it from the rational Forms by which its own material is to be understood and ordered is not one that we seek articulation through conceptual form borrowed from other spheres of knowledge or other scientific pursuits theology that will only be a theology of revelation that lives through ministering a critical from against every *Weltanschauung* that operates with no *praembula fidei*, no framework of prior understanding that renounces every form of natural theology is not something that one can accommodate to culture or assimilated to the spirit of the age, or fall under the

14 “The Christian Community and the Civil Community”, in *op. cit.*, p. 169.

15 *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

16 *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*. Westminster Press, 1952, p. 319.

17 Herberg, pp. 35-36.

domination of a way of thinking arising out of the existence of the natural man, but one that can only challenge human culture to unceasing reconstruction, and be the greatest enemy of all ideological distortion of the Christians faith.¹⁸

While this bold enthusiastic statement may reflect a feature of Barth's intentions the actuality of his theology in the *Church Dogmatics* falls short in almost every respect, as we already suggested. Fundamentally, as we have seen is the unbiblical *nature-grace dualism* which permeates Barth's thought.

This dualism is immediately evident where the preface of the *Church Dogmatics* where he maintains that "...dogmatics is not a free science. It is bound to the sphere of the Church, where alone it is possible and meaningful..."¹⁹ the community in and for which I've written is in that of the church and community of theological endeavour."²⁰ Such a formulation presupposes the (liberal rationalist) university – the realm of *reason* – which practices free, (i.e., not bound by Christian or any faith) science alongside which is the church which has its own 'scientific' discipline, that of dogmatic theology which is bound to the Christian *faith*. Barth presumes that reason is to have autonomy in its own realm in the same fashion as theology in its own requires a similar autonomy: "I believe it is expected of the Church and its theology – a world within a world no less than chemistry or the theatre – that it should keep precisely to the rhythm of its own relevant concerns...."²¹ Theology in contradistinction to other disciplines is *fides quaerens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding:

Dogmatics is a part of the work of human knowledge... Over and above this, however, it demands Christian faith, which does not simply come of itself even with the deepest and purest surrender to this task. Dogmatics is a function of the Christian Church... In dogmatics Christianity means the proper content of talk about God ventured in the fear of God.²²

Barth quotes approvingly the same distinction which he finds in Luther:

Doctor of arts, medicine, law and philosophy, can be made by the pope, the emperor and the universities; but be quite sure that no one can make a doctor of Holy Scripture save only the Holy Ghost from heaven, as Christ says in John vi: "they must all be taught by God himself."²³

18 Karl Barth, *An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-31*. London: SCM, 1962, pp. 177-178. Although Torrance reflects accurately a strand in Barth's intentions it seems to me that none of these intentions are actually realised in Barth's theology. It is by no means difficult to demonstrate – and most of this one can find Barth actually admitting, puffing his pipe and passing on – that his theology does borrow conceptual forms from other spheres of knowledge, is shaped by the modern fragmented *Weltanschauung*, operates with a *praeambula fidei* and is an ideological distortion of the Christian faith. This paper touches on some of these points.

19 *Church Dogmatics* (CD). Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2nd edn, 1975, I/1 p. xiii.

20 CD I/1 p. xv.

21 CD I/1 p. xvi.

22 CD I/1 p. 17.

23 CD I/1 p. 19 quoting Luther, *An den Christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des Christlichen standes besserung*, 1520, W.A., 6, p. 460, 1.28.

More fully Barth then proceeds to maintain that regeneration is a prerequisite of theology and impossible without it:

Yet the original demand of Anselm, Luther and Melanchthon in which the older and newer doctrine of the *theologia regenitorum*, of existential theology, has its *particula veri*, must not be lost from view... without this, theology would become the irrelevant wisdom of spectators outside the Church. There would be knowledge only in the dependent form of an imitative formal participation in the knowledge of the Church and faith. If the latter were to fail, then, as Anselm rightly stated, such a theology would lose its power of knowledge. But theology does nor can at any time find human safeguards against the danger of becoming the irrelevant wisdom of spectators outside the Church, and therefore a-theology. Faith, regeneration, conversion, existential thinking on the basis of a preceding existential encounter, are no doubt indispensable prerequisites of dogmatic work, yet not to the extent that they imply an experience and attitude, a desire and activity, a knowledge and achievement of the theologian, so that his theology is a personal cry, an account of his biographical situation, but to the extent that they imply the grace of divine predestination, the free gift of the Word and Holy Spirit, the act of calling the Church, which must always come upon the theologian from the acting God in order that he may really be what he does and what his name suggests.²⁴

In the light of this, what then is Barth's view of the nature of dogmatic theology and its relation to other disciplines? The first place it should be noted that Barth's profoundly restricts the Augustinian-Anselm theme of *fides quaerens intellectum* to theology whereas within the former tradition that theme potentially implied that faith in the Christian revelation was the key to *all* forms of understanding. Indeed, it would be anachronistic to look for a systematic distinction between, e.g., theology and philosophy prior to the work of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. It was Thomas who introduced the basic correlation of *philosophy* with reason (minus revelation) and *theology* with revelation (plus reason).²⁵ Even here, however, there remained a trace of the totality character of *fides quaerens intellectum* in Thomas's view that theology was properly the queen of the sciences with the right to correct and rule over them.²⁶ In short Barth restricts the biblical theme of faith as a precondition of understanding to a highly restricted area of human knowledge. Revelation nor theology provide any light for the disciplines. This brings out the sharp discontinuity between *grace and nature* in the ground-motive which continues to shape Barth's thought. This discontinuity or indeed antithesis dominates his view of theology and its relation to the other disciplines.

This discontinuity or rather antithesis inevitably penetrates the very heart of theology itself for Barth takes over the Thomistic correlation above. He correlates theology with revelation (plus reason). Theology therefore straddles the antithesis for revelation belongs to the realm of *grace* whereas reason belongs the realm of *nature*. There is *no place* for human reason in the sphere of

24 CD 1/1, p. 21.

25 I owe this formulation to Al Wolter's inaugural lecture at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, published as *Our Place in the Philosophical Tradition*. Toronto: Wedge, 1976.

26 *Summa Theologica*, Q.1, Art. 5, reply. obj. 2.

faith – the two are mortal enemies. Yet in order to constitute itself as a discipline theology *requires* the activity of human reason. Barth writes:

In dogmatics the Church has to measure its talk about God by the standard of its own being, i.e., of divine revelation. Its talk about God, however, is that of the intrinsically godless reason of man which is inimical to belief. At every point, therefore, dogmatics is a struggle between this reason of man and the revelation believed in the Church. This struggle, however, takes place in the Church itself, so that it is not orientated to the contradiction of reason but to the declaration of revelation.²⁷

Within this unbiblical dualism the best which is possible is for one pole to be given priority. Barth gives the *grace* pole priority, but this leaves the status of the *nature* pole deeply ambivalent. This sets up the new polarity, with nature being conceived, sometimes as the enemy of grace and faith, sometimes as separate and quite religiously neutral, sometimes as a subservient assistant whose services are valued. Barth writes:

Dogmatic work stands or falls by whether the standard by which Church proclamation is measured is the revelation attested in Holy Scripture and not a philosophical, ethical, psychological or political theory. Now it is obvious that everyone who works at dogmatics works more or less with specific intellectual presuppositions. The only question is whether in addition to these he also knows the sign of the divine promise which is set up in the Church and whether he is able and willing, in a way that admits of no proof, to take this sign so seriously that in this context its direction takes absolute precedence over all the directions he might owe to the humanities. If and so far as this is so, his work is scientific, no matter how scientific it may be considered from other angles. It is quite right – and we are not questioning this here but emphatically underlining it – that an education in the arts and a familiarity with the thinking of the philosopher, psychologist, historian, aesthetician, etc., should be demanded of the dogmatician or the theologian. The dogmatician, too, must think and speak in a particular age and should thus be a man of his age, which also means a man of the past that constitutes his age, i.e., an educated man. Nevertheless, the only element in education that makes him a dogmatician is the one which is not provided in all these other disciplines and which consists in indemonstrable and unassuming attention to the sign of Holy Scripture around which the Church gathers and continually becomes the Church. By this attention, and by nothing else, the theologian becomes a theologian. It is not a question, then, of depreciating other disciplines. It is sheer nonsense to talk of criticising culture in this regard, for in the last resort attention to Holy Scripture might be called an element of culture or education.²⁸

What Barth here appears to be saying is that the dogmatician works with presuppositions which he has drawn, as a man of his age, from his education, especially his education in the humanities. Barth seems to be emphatic that there is no problem in this. The only proviso is equally emphatic, that ‘in addition’ the sign of the divine promise (= Holy Scripture?) must take ‘absolute precedence over all the directions he might owe to the humanities.’ But what sense can one make of such a mandate? Is

27 CD I/1, pp. 28-29.

28 CD I/1, pp. 283-284.

it possible both to *work with* 20th century intellectual presuppositions (drawn from philosophy, psychology, history, etc.), which reject or deny any form of biblical revelation, while at the same time giving “absolute precedence” to Holy Scripture? Might not giving absolute precedence to Holy Scripture lead to a critique of contemporary culture and its presuppositions... and a search of more Christian presuppositions in dogmatics? Barth presents dogmatics as both an autonomous bastion of Christian faith which draws its method from its object (*gegenstand*) and as a discipline which is unproblematically shaped by contemporary intellectual presuppositions. A dogmatics which attempts to respond to these contradictory imperatives will always be, and can never cease to be, an endless, restless, interminable struggle between (in Barth’s phrases) the “intrinsically godless reason of man” and the “faith believed in the Church.”²⁹ Barth’s opposition to Roman Catholicism and Protestant modernism seems to be grounded in the fact that they do not accept his assumption of a dialectical tension or contradiction between nature (reason) and grace (revelation), but rather assume a continuity or harmony. Hence his hostility to the *analogia entis* of Roman Catholic theology, which provides the ontological basis of the idea that nature is the preamble to grace, and that revelation, though it transcends reason, does not contradict it. In many ways, Protestant modernism follows a similar route. Karl Löwith speaks approvingly of one of its seminal works, Kant’s *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), in the following terms: “Kant interprets the whole history of Christianity as a gradual advance from a religion of revelation to a religion of reason... It is the most advanced expression of the Christian faith for the very reason that it eliminates the irrational presupposition of faith and grace.” Barth writes that “the roads diverge most pitilessly and momentously to the right hand and the left” according to whether a dogmatics is “finally determined by Scripture” or “finally determined by other authorities.”

One could only admit on both sides that under the same name we were engaged in matters that differed *toto coelo* and that we had nothing to learn from one another apart from a warning against what is absolutely forbidden, which would mean giving a share to the other side. Let us be under no illusions! The sword of this total separation does hang over both our opposition to Roman Catholicism and also our opposition to Protestant Modernism, and something of its threat will always be discernible in the necessary discussions with both. The only point is that in reality the course of this boundary cannot be traced in a general way but has always to be found in each individual case and in the last analysis it is indeed completely hidden from us.³⁰

In this passage, we can clearly see the contradictory consequences of Barth’s contradictory imperative for dogmatics. It turns out that, in the last analysis, the great divergence of the roads between dogmatics finally determined by Scripture, or not, is completely hidden from us! Those things, which differ *toto coelo* are, in fact, humanly *indistinguishable*! Here Barth is *en route* for theological agnosticism again as he was in his earlier more openly dialectical theology. Nor should this surprise us for the ground-motive underlying his theology is merely a variation of that underlying Roman Catholicism and Protestant Modernism. His quarrel with them is no more than a family quarrel. He, like them, is fundamentally presenting a synthesis of Christianity and paganism (or humanism). Consequently, the rhetoric of the “absolute precedence” can mean little over against them, except wanting a slightly lighter shade of grey. Within a synthesis, there cannot be an

29 CD I/1, p. 57.

30 CD I/1, p. 286.

absolute precedence, but only a relative one, for the revelation of God is ever bound to the intrinsically godless reason of man which is seeking to suppress it... even, or perhaps especially, or even exclusively, in dogmatics.

It should not surprise us that the relation of such a theology to other disciplines is also fraught with ambiguities and uncertainties. This is immediately evident in Barth's discussion as to whether dogmatic theology is a science or not. Within the course of a few pages at the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics* one can quote passages which deny and affirm the claim as well as others which maintain that the question is not important... though discussed at considerable length. The fundamental feature of Barth's outlook in the *Church Dogmatics* (albeit not without a few contradictory qualifications) is that of a discontinuity between theology and the other disciplines with the consequent denial that theology is a science alongside the other sciences. Working within the nature-grace dialectic, Barth's central anxiety in this context is that, to use Francis Schaeffer's phrase, *nature would eat up grace*. Consequently, he feels he must assert and vindicate the "autonomy" of theology at any cost. Theology, as we have seen above, has enough of a struggle with godless reason within its own citadel and so is hardly disposed to welcome or to join in co-operative enterprise with the other disciplines whose only principle (in universal practice if not in theory) is godless reason itself. Barth writes:

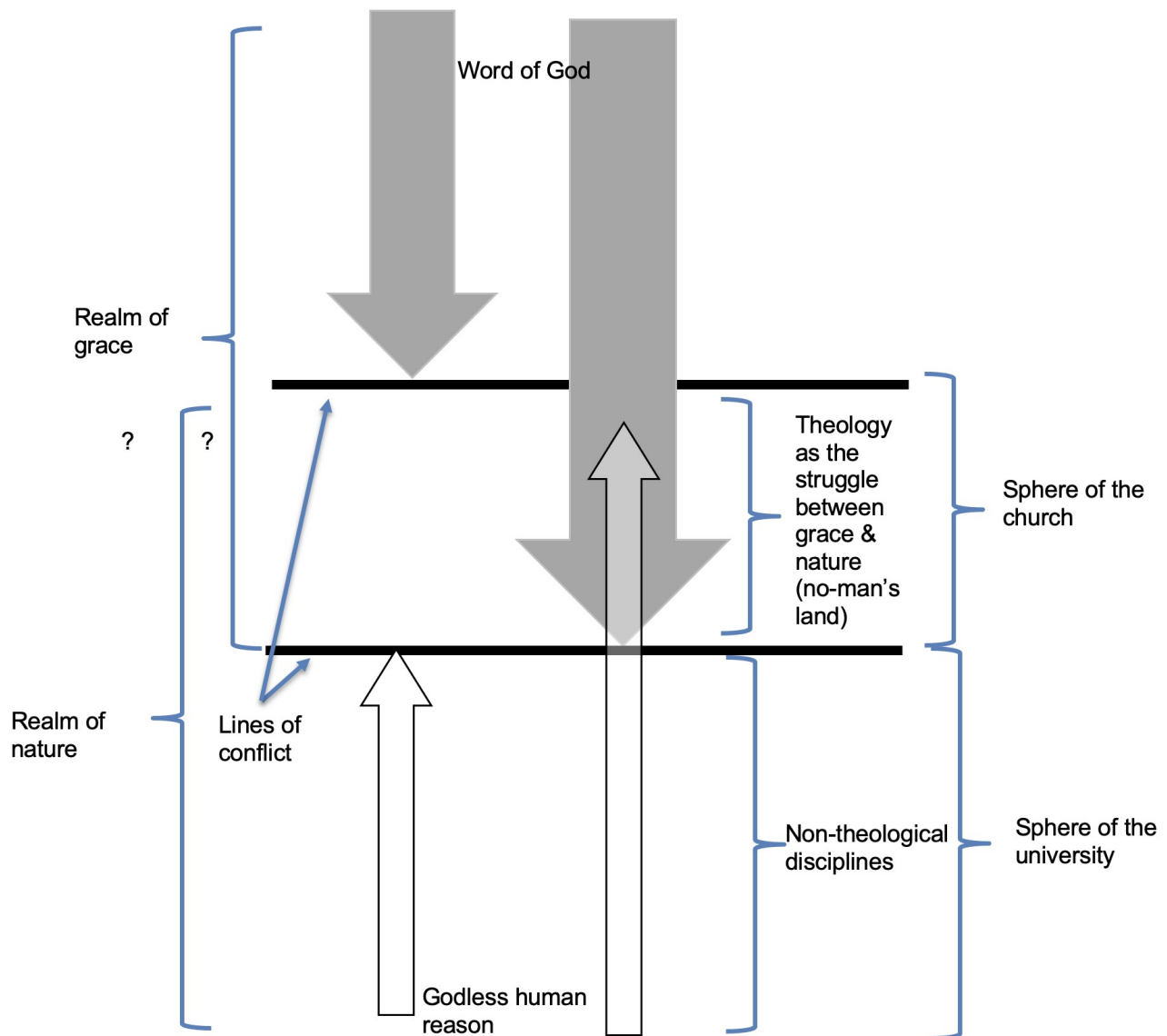
If theology allows itself to be called, or calls itself, a science, it cannot in so doing accept the obligation of submission to standards valid for other sciences.

Similarly, it cannot justify itself before other sciences on the score of propounding for discussion by them a concept of science which does not exclude but includes a good theology. To set itself in a systematic relationship to other sciences, theology would have to regard its own separate existence as necessary in principle. But this is the very thing which it cannot do. It cannot think of itself as a link in an ordered cosmos, but only as a stop-gap in a disordered cosmos. But how can there possibly be a concept of knowledge common to this stop-gap and the disordered cosmos? Any attempt of this kind must founder at once upon the conflict of will whether or not to take up the theme of theology. And from the theological standpoint this conflict is no mere problem to be solved by a synthetic construction.

Since the days of Schleiermacher, many encyclopaedic attempts have been made to include theology in the sciences. But the common objection may be made against all of them that they overlook the abnormality of the special existence of theology and therefore essay that which is radically impossible. The actual result of all such attempts has always been the disturbing or destructive surrender of theology to a general concept of science and the mild unconcern with which non-theological science, perhaps with a better sense of realities than theologians with their desire for synthesis, can usually reply to this mode of justifying theology.³¹

31 *CD I/1*, p. 10.

The abnormality of theology is that it stands at the boundary of two discontinuous worlds, unavoidably subject in theory and practise to the contradictory imperatives of both. It can “have no epistemological basis.”³² It is simultaneously impossible and necessary.



Ideally, theology is a dialectical synthesis in which the word of God dominates the thought of humankind which is subservient to it. In this case, theology is distanced radically from the non-theological disciplines. At the same time, theology remains fallible human work like the non-theological sciences and in practice (and theory) shows the influence of the non-theological sciences – especially philosophy. Indeed, philosophy is inescapable, for as Aristotle wrote in a fragment from one of his last works – “You say one must philosophise. Then you must philosophise. You say one should not philosophise. Then to prove your point, you must philosophise. In any case, you must philosophise.” This is evident in the lengthy passage we have quoted from Barth above. In it, he is rejecting a mythological theory of science – at least with

32 CD I/1, p. 7.

respect to theology – only to replace it with the alternative view that the methods of a science must properly be determined by the nature of its object.³³ As Barth puts it: “The only way which theology has of proving its scientific character is to devote itself to the task of knowledge as determined by its actual theme and thus to show what it means by true science.”³⁴

The methodological view presupposes the “unity of the sciences” and behind that, the unity of the cosmos. Barth’s underlying dualism leads him therefore to reject this view in favour of that which was being developed by Husserl and the phenomenologists in that period. In *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1913) Husserl writes of the need for all “empirical sciences” to be “grounded in their own regional ontologies and not merely on the pure Logic which is common to all sciences.”³⁵ The primary task of his “radical ‘classification’ of the sciences” is that of “the separating of the regions.” These affinities are even closer to Barth’s conception of dogmatic theology in a section of *Ideas* entitled “Sciences of the Dogmatic and Sciences of the Philosophic Standpoint.” Husserl writes:

The *right attitude* to take up in the *pre-philosophical*, and in a good sense, the *dogmatic* sphere of inquiry, to which all the empirical sciences (but not these alone) belong, is in full consciousness *to discard all scepticism together with all “natural philosophy” and “theory of knowledge”* and find the data of knowledge there where they actually face you, whatever difficulties epistemological reflection may *subsequently* raise concerning the possibility of the data being there.³⁶

Phenomenology’s programme of “bracketing” and presuppositionless description soon faced the intractable problem as to the concepts, categories, and terms in which the data were to be rightly described, for no pure phenomenological language existed, and existing language was ridiculed with (metaphysical) pre-understandings as to the nature of the data. Barth seems to acknowledge that his own programme for theology as a science, “determined by its actual theme,” is rendered problematic if not strictly impossible by this same state of affairs, for he writes: “And let us not forget that theology in fact, so surely as it avails itself of human speech, is also a philosophy or a conglomerate of all sorts of philosophy.”³⁷ If this is the case then it is hard to understand the *opposition* that Barth sets up between theology and the other disciplines, unless one recognises the *polarising power* of the nature-grace ground-motive.

Not being able to find any (theoretical) justification for this polarisation, Barth argues that it is simply *the most practical approach in the present circumstances*. This can be read as an abandonment of his entire theological programme. In a crucial passage on this point, he writes:

Even the asserted independence of theology in relation to other sciences cannot be proved to be necessary in principle. It is indeed unfortunate that the question of the truth of talk

33 For a valuable account of discussions about the nature of science which provided the immediate context of the writing of CD I/1 see Wulfhart Pannenberg’s *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976, pp. 265-276.

34 CD I/1 p. 10.

35 *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. London: Collier-MacMillan, 1969, p. 71.

36 *Ideas*, p. 86.

37 CD. I/1(1st. edn), p. 188. cf. pp. 321Ff; 325ff.

about God should be handled as a question apart by a special faculty, and, while we have to recognise that such a course is unavoidable in practice, we cannot find any final reasons to justify it. Only theological arrogance could argue the point on other than practical grounds. Within the sphere of the Church, philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, or pedagogics, whether individually or in conjunction, might well take up the task of measuring the Church's talk about God by its being as the Church, thus making a special theology superfluous. Theology does not in fact possess special keys to special doors. Nor does it control a basis of knowledge which might not find actualisation in other sciences. Nor does it know an object of enquiry necessarily concealed from other sciences. Only by failing to recognise the actualisation of revelation, the possibility of grace and therefore its own nature, could it possibly make any such claim. Similarly, we cannot possibly prove that there is any necessity in principle for a theology of the service of God. Might it not be that Jer. 31:34 is in process of fulfilment? Philosophy and secular science generally do not have to be secular or pagan. There might be such a thing as *philosophia christiana*.³⁸

However:

in all the three areas of theological enquiry philosophy, history, psychology, etc. have always succeeded in practice only in increasing the self-alienation of the Church and the distortion and confusion of its talk about God. And in the interpretation offered, as the relevant experts at once object, philosophy ceases to be philosophy, or history history. There never has actually been a *philosophia christiana*, for if it was *philosophia* it was not *christiana*, and if it was *christiana* it was not *philosophia*.³⁹

While one can agree with much of what Barth says in these two passages, the vital issue lies in the explanation of this situation and the course of action proposed in the light of that explanation. Why is it that philosophy, etc., has caused distortion and confusion in the church? On the basis of what Barth has written, must it not be because the philosophy, etc. of which theology has (necessarily) availed itself has been “*pagan or secular*” rather than a *philosophia christiana* (which has not been available). But the answer to this cannot be the establishment of a scientific, dogmatic theology for in that theology rests on philosophical presuppositions (as Barth has elsewhere conceded), then it can be argued that there has never been a *theologica christiana*, for if it was *theologia*, it was not *christiana*, and if it was *christiana*, it was not *theologia*. Yes, in spite of everything that seems to be the direction in which Barth heads. He willingly seems to take the word of the “relevant experts” – who are these people? – that a *Christian* philosophy ceases to be philosophy. He certainly does not see a *philosophia Christiana* as vital to the problems of both philosophy and theology. Nor, it seems, as a genuine Christian alternative to Pagan or secular philosophy.

This becomes clear in summary by Edward A. Dowey of a later essay by Barth entitled *Philosophie und Theologie*:

The strife between philosophy and theology must come and should not be shirked or avoided by either some narrow division of labour or a friendly peace treaty... The primacy of revelation which characterizes theology and sets it off from philosophy is a necessary

38 CD I/1, p. 5.

39 CD I/1, p. 6.

primacy. It is of such a quality that the theologian may finally look in astonishment at the philosopher for not availing himself of it. However that may be, the philosopher cannot be expected, as philosopher, to abandon the ground on which he stands and adopt revelation as the base of his work, for then he would become a crypto-theologian, which is Barth's term for *philosophia Christiana*. Theology, on the other hand, should not allow philosophy to become merely *advocatus diaboli*, something to be guarded against and a set of methods to be avoided. Rather the theologian should listen to the philosopher and be thankful for him as the *advocatus hominis et mundi*, as the truly wise of this world. The theologian and the philosopher cannot really "sit down and converse" because their paths cross or intersect rather than run together. But they can and should "discuss and debate."⁴⁰

Here we return again to the scholastic correlation of *philosophy* with reason (minus revelation) and *theology* with revelation (plus reason). It seems that when Barth spoke earlier that there "...might be such a thing as *philosophia christiana*" he was throwing out a remark out of character with his whole position. His subsequent rejection – in principle – of *philosophia christiana* as crypto-theology is fully in keeping with his neo-scholastic dualism with its belief in the (semi?) autonomy of reason. As with Luther the autonomy of reason is only restricted from the "realm of grace" but enjoys sovereignty over the rest of reality.

The result is as we anticipated, that Barth's Christocentrism while it *might appear to give pre-eminence to Christ actually and tragically detracts from his renewing regime*. Barth assures us that the revelation of Christ only has significance for theology and the Church. For the philosopher (and one can add the historian, psychologist, sociologist, political scientist, aesthetician, natural scientist, mathematician, etc., etc., etc.) cannot be expected as philosopher (historian, etc.) to abandon the ground on which he stands and adopt revelation as the base of his work. This clearly presupposes that the ground on which these disciplines rest is reliable, indeed as being for them far more satisfactory and suitable than revelation would be. This cannot but provoke the thought as to why theology should not also avail itself of this firm ground also so as to develop a "religion within the bounds of reason alone," a truly scientific theology on which all can agree. Barth may well have thrown a bomb into the playground of the theologians by insisting on the primacy of revelation... but there is little doubt that his implicit – and sometimes explicit – message to the rest of the intellectual world is that of 'Peace peace, when there is no peace but rather *crisis*.' He cannot summon us to make every thought subject to the Lordship of Christ. He cannot proclaim that in Christ is hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He cannot warn men against vain philosophy which is not according to Christ. He has no eye for the radicality and totality of creation, fall, and redemption. The gospel is not good news for the totality of scholarship but only for theology. The totality of scholarship is not fallen, misdirected, under judgment and in need of repentance renewal and redirection... only theology... and there are serious doubts about even that. All this, of course, is quite consistent with his doctrine of the Church. Indeed, in a sense, it all flows from his doctrine of the Church. For Barth the Church is not the People of God in the totality of its life but rather the cultic organisation of the People of God, the organization focused on worship and preaching. The central issue here can be formulated as follows: *whether or not the church as we commonly refer to it can be identified with the fulness of the Body of Christ, and whether or not the*

40 E. A. Dowey, "But is it Barth?" In John Hick (ed.) *Faith and the Philosopher*. London: Macmillan, 1964, pp. 207-208.

church as we know it today can embrace the total life and witness of the People of God.⁴¹ If these questions are answered affirmatively as Barth does then the understanding of the Lordship of Christ and the vision of the kingdom of God cannot but suffer a disastrous reductionism, the inevitable bitter fruit of the nature-grace ground-motive.

We turn finally now to the more specific aspects of Barth's Christocentrism. We have already seen that Barth has effectively limited Christ to theology. Consequently, Barth's assertion of Christ amounts to a *small advance* in the aftermath of liberal theology's *all but total retreat* à la Feuerbach. What should impress us is *how little* of the Christian faith remains even after Barth's alleged "Copernican revolution," rather than seeing Barth as the great rescuer of the Biblical faith from the clutches of subjectivism and anthropocentrism. This is seldom recognised by evangelical critics of Barth for precisely the reason that they are working out of the same dialectical nature-grace ground-motive as I have documented and criticised elsewhere.⁴² From such evangelicals one gains the impression that if Barth were to change his doctrine of Scripture and abandon his universalism then all would be well, and they would become Barthians. Indeed, it is easy to see how a "liberalised" evangelicalism – rejecting an infallible Bible and limited atonement – would readily move in Barth's direction.

To return to our main point, the total retreat of which we spoke was the secularization of the modern worldview in which all things are regarded as intelligible without reference to God by men who have no need of that hypothesis. Not only is God redundant but is also explained within that worldview as a human projection so that 'God' is unintelligible without reference to man. By intelligible was meant "scientifically" (or naturalistically) intelligible. However, while there was the (eager) willingness to see God as a projection of man there was little willingness to see man as a mere 'projection' (or epiphenomenon) of nature. This was because one of the central motives of the renaissance-enlightenment movement was to replace the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of *man* but not that of *nature*. In this context the modern Nature-Freedom ground-motive came to self-consciousness for the first time in the philosophy of Kant. Kant "limits science to make room for faith," faith that is in human moral freedom. Kant gives priority in the dialectic to the freedom (or personality) motive and allocates it to the noumenal realm i.e., the realm of reality. The nature (or science) motive is restricted to the phenomenal realm of appearances. For Kant the order, meaning and structure present in the world of nature cannot provide the basis of a natural theology for, in the last analysis they owe their existence to the categories of the human understanding.⁴³ *The order of nature simply points back to man and says nothing whatever about God. This is true not merely of nature but of the whole phenomenal world.* Given Kant's epistemology God cannot reveal himself in the world or in human knowledge, nor did metaphysical argument provide some alternative route

41 This crucial matter which has massive implications is explored in D. L. Roper. *Biblical Foundations for Radical Discipleship* Wellington, NZ: Foundation for Christian Studies, 1969.

42 See my "The Growing Crisis of the Evangelical Worldview." MA in Theology, Bristol University, 1973. online: www.allofliferedeemed.co.uk/russell.

43 "... the order and regularity in the appearances which we entitle *Nature*. We introduce ourselves. We could never find them in appearances had not we ourselves or the nature of our mind set them there... Although we learn many laws through experience, they are still only special determinations of still higher laws, and the highest of these, under which all others stand, issue *apriori* from the understanding itself... Thus the understanding is more than a power of formulating rules through a comparison of appearances; it is itself the lawgiver of Nature." *Critique of Pure Reason* A126. See also *Prolegomena* para. 36. "How is nature itself possible."

to the transcendent. On this basis God is in the same category as Kant's "thing-in-itself," beyond knowledge and beyond speech, in fact "totally other."

If this exposition of Kant sounds rather Barthian it is because Barth immersed himself in the study of Kant during his student days, reinforced by the fact that Kant has left his mark on the entirety of modern theology hardly without exception. Barth's theology reinterprets the medieval nature-grace ground-motive in terms of the modern nature-freedom ground-motive. Dooyeweerd has characterised this transformation as follows:

Many feel that Barth, having absolutely separated nature and grace, mortally wounded the Roman Catholic synthesis. In truth, however, dialectical theology in its religious ground-motive remained closely related to Roman Catholicism. Historically speaking, one might say that the Roman Catholic Church had taken revenge on the Reformation by way of the continued impact of its dialectical ground-motive within Protestantism. For this motive had a "unifying" effect only so long as the Roman Catholic idea of the church, with its central papal authority, was accepted. With the rejection of the papacy, the artificial synthesis could not remain intact because of the tension within the ground-motive. The Reformation split apart into a disconnected diversity of directions, *each identifiable by its particular view of the relation of "nature" and "grace."* It was not the scriptural ground-motive of creation, fall, and redemption that led to this division within the Reformation but the continual influence of the dialectical ground-motive of Roman Catholicism.

Dialectical theology had of course severed itself from the Greek and scholastic conception of nature. By incorporating the new humanistic view of nature in its dialectical tension with the humanistic view of freedom, dialectical theology evinced that it was influenced by humanism. Here the difference also becomes apparent. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church accepted the Greek view of nature in a positive sense by attempting a reconciliation with the Christian creation motive, *Barth allowed the creation motive to recede from sight*, sacrificing it to the motives of fall and redemption in Jesus Christ. The great master of dialectical theology had no use at all for *creation ordinances* that might serve as guidelines in our "natural life." According to Barth the fall corrupted "nature" so thoroughly that the knowledge of the *creation ordinances* was completely lost.⁴⁴

In allowing the creation motive to recede from sight Barth engages in a systematic re-interpretation of the Christian faith. This is striking at every point where the realities of the Christian faith are related to the created order. Working with Kant's phenomena-noumena distinction he sees no problem with the relation of creation and evolution... as long as theology and science respect their mutual limits! Creation is a "theological truth" which has no relation to the findings of natural science. Similarly, natural science while it remains natural science and refrains from all cosmological speculation it can in no way conflict with the theological truth of creation.⁴⁵ What

44 Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*. Toronto: Wedge, pp. 145-146.

45 "At this point we find ourselves in basic opposition to philosophy, but we are all the closer methodologically to the inductive sciences based on observation and inference. The latter are differentiated from theological science by the fact that their object and the source of their knowledge are neither identical with each other nor with the Word of God. The source of their knowledge lies in the process of observation and inference and therefore not in faith in the Word of God. And the object with which they are concerned is the abundance of external phenomena susceptible to the inductive method, and therefore not the creature of God as such, knowable in the Word of God as the being of

about the fall? For Barth there never was a time when man was not yet a sinner and was innocent; “There was never a golden age. It makes no sense to look back longingly to one. Primordial man was a sinner ‘from the beginning.’”⁴⁶ For Barth all talk about Adam means the truth about us. Genesis 1 & 2 Barth calls *sacred saga*. In his exegesis, he employs an allegorical method which is

the reality distinct from God. All the same, genuine science has the following points in common with genuine theological scholarship. (i) It does not carry with it any world-view. It is content to observe, classify, investigate, understand and describe phenomena. It does not unfold any ontology of the cosmos. To the extent that it does so it becomes an interpretation, and ceases to be exact science. Such a process is no part of its essential function. There is no scientific world-view. On the contrary, it must essentially renounce all such interpretation. A misunderstanding is always involved when its exponents think that they can present the sum of the hypotheses which temporarily mark the bounds of their knowledge as a world-view, as “*the view of exact science*”; and when theologians in anxious dismay think they must regard this view as an interpretation of reality always entitled to respect. Its exponents could and can also be dispassionate, holding aloof from all mythologising and philosophising. Exact science dedicated to its object and its method, working positively and not dreaming and romancing, is in fact pure knowledge: pure in its differentiation from theology; but pure also in its differentiation from all pseudo-theology; pure in the fact that it confines itself to the study of phenomena but does not lose itself in the construction of world systems.” *CD* III/2 pp. 12-13. This remarkable passage was published in 1948. In many respects we see the continuing influence of phenomenology with its ideal of presuppositionless description of phenomena, together with the bracketing off of all assumptions and theories about the ontological status of the phenomena in question. For all Barth’s rhetoric about “... basic opposition to philosophy” and being “... closer methodologically to the inductive sciences” Barth’s theory of exact science shows not only the influence of phenomenology but also that of the ethos that produced logical positivism – although it should be mentioned that Barth nowhere mentions logical positivism or any leading logical positivists in the *Church Dogmatics*. What was crucial to logical positivism was development of a *principle of demarcation* by which science could be distinguished from all metaphysics (ontology, philosophy, speculation, worldviews, attitudes to life, theology, etc.) so that it can be liberated and purified from all that has no essential connection with it, i.e., that which is without real cognitive content which is what Barth intends with the phrase “pure knowledge.” By 1948 not only was phenomenology’s programme of pure description in disarray for there were many competing descriptions which at the very least echoed various worldview orientations. By 1948 the logical positivist search for a criteria of empirical significance was enjoying little success. The various modifications of the verification (and later the falsification) principle never realised the hope and expectations of the logical positivists. Strict criteria excluding many of the entities and principles of theoretical physics (“science” *par excellence*!) while more liberal criteria which did not ban the latter admitted what was visibly metaphysics into the sacred circle of “science.” The unwelcome message of this failure was that this programme of liberating science from metaphysics was a positivist illusion. This message was reinforced by the continuing philosophical debates among physicists, the lack of evident success in psychology and sociology where zealous positivists had attempted to make these disciplines “scientific” and finally the new philosophy of science, largely initiated by T. S. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). The latter saw metaphysics not to be the unwarranted speculation beyond the established results of science but rather – both historically and epistemologically – as the precondition of any scientific theorising whatever. What is seldom recognised is that this situation was already recognised by Abraham Kuyper (1837- 1920), in the latter part of the 19th century and forms the essential background of the establishment of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880. Kuyper rejected as illusory the view that the sciences were religiously and metaphysically neutral and that they were autonomous. In his *Stone Lectures* at Princeton University in 1898 he maintained: “... theology is only one of the many sciences that demand Calvinistic treatment. Philosophy, psychology, aesthetics, jurisprudence, the social sciences, literature common and even the medical and the natural sciences, each and all of these when philosophically conceived, go back to principles, and of necessity even the question must be put with much more penetrating serious than hitherto, whether the ontological and anthropological principles that reign supreme in the present method of the sciences are in agreement with the principles of Calvinism, or at variance with their very essence.” *Lectures on Calvinism*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970, p. 194. Kuyper’s programme of a Christian reformation of scholarship came to fruition in the publication of Herman Dooyeweerd’s *Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* [Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea] (1935-36), and then republished as a revised English translation as *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (4 Vols, 1953-58). In contradistinction to Barth and the positive tradition Dooyeweerd argues that: “... each realm of theoretical inquiry, whether or not it is called “empirical” in the narrower sense, presupposes a theoretical vision of temporal reality. And such a theoretical vision of reality must necessarily exceed the boundaries of any special science and exhibit a *philosophical* character. Consequently, it appears at the same time, that *no single special science can possess an essential autonomy with respect to philosophy in the sense of a theory of reality.*” Vol. 1, p. 49.

46 *CD* IV/1, p. 567. Quoted by G. C. Berkouwer in *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956, pp. 83-84.

dominated by his Christomonism and anthropological concerns. He writes as if Genesis tells us nothing about the non-human creation and man's relationship to it.

Of this S.U. Zuidema in his brilliant paper "The Structure of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation" writes:

All of the exegesis of Gen. 1 is dominated by this allegorical method. It is the reason that Prenter spoke of "creation docetism" in Karl Barth. Karl Barth, just like Karl Marx, has little interest in nature. His doctrine of creation immediately heads for a theological anthropology, just as this anthropology, as we shall see, heads for a soteriological Christology, so that it is governed by this Christology. That is why his doctrine of creation also is dominated by his Christology. For example, as early as Genesis 1 he reads the name of Jesus Christ.

Is this what the author of the saga did? Barth has asked himself this question and answered it as follows: the (second) saga does not speak subjectively but objectively about Christ. This is certainly the most extreme application of the hermeneutical rule which Barth himself posited: Genesis 1 and 2 are to be interpreted by the rest of Scripture. But the result of this rule is that Genesis 1 and 2 no longer get a chance to say anything themselves. In fact, they have nothing to say anymore, and they could very well be eliminated from our Bible, since we would not miss anything anyway.

This is really one of the chief objections which we have to Barth's exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2 (and also Genesis 3). These passages do not speak for themselves any longer: they are interpreted anthropologically and Christologically-historically in such a way that the text itself disappears and, together with it, the creation, especially the non-human creation. Barth does great injustice to the text itself in dealing with Genesis 1. He obscures the text by way of his anthropological and Christological allegorizations. What is worse, he does not obscure it with the commentary given by the rest of Scripture. Rather, Barth obscures it with *his* forced commentary on the rest of Scripture, which culminates in his doctrine of the atonement.⁴⁷

Barth goes on to use his Christo-allegorical method to dissolve the classical texts which refer to the revelation of God in the cosmos. Barth concedes that Psalm 19 says that the heavens declare the glory of God, but whenever the Bible says concerning the glory of God in his works is "...itself read into the text of the cosmos... It itself and as such the text of the cosmos is dumb, as is clearly stated in Psalm 19: 3: 'There is no speech nor language; their voice is not heard'."⁴⁸ This "reading into" shares nothing in common with Calvin's contention that the "spectacles" of special revelation are needed for the correct understanding of general revelation. For Calvin the revelation is objectively there in the cosmos whether or not men are blind to it. Such culpable blindness – because of the reality of revelation – is the basis of the guilt of all men before God. Similarly in Romans 1 Barth maintains that it is not in the light of general revelation that the heathen are without excuse but in the light of Golgotha. However, even this needs qualification, for Barth so identifies

47 Zuidema, S. U. "The Structure of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Creation", *Communication and Confrontation* Toronto: Wedge, 1972, pp. 316-317.

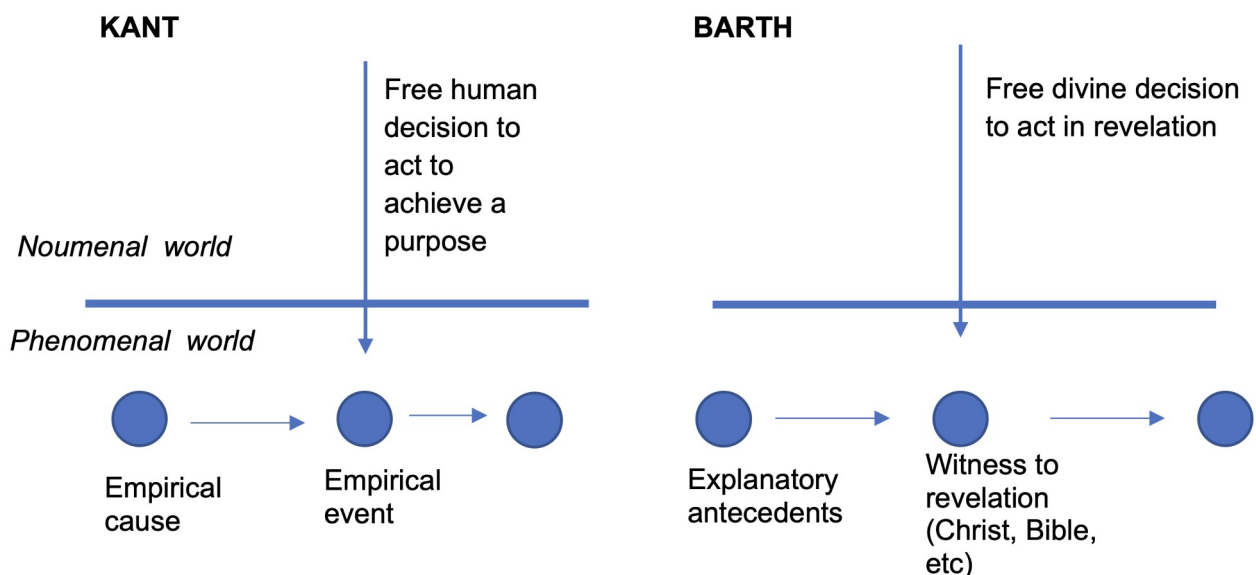
48 CD II/1, pp. 123, quoted by G. C. Berkouwer. *General Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964, pp. 29-30.

revelation and reconciliation that the lack of reconciliation implies the absence of revelation. (This is analogous to the Socratic doctrine that if men knew what the good is they would do it.)

What needs emphasis here is the fact that Barth not only rejects general revelation but also goes a long way towards treating all ‘special revelation’ in the same manner according to the same principle. The principle is that whatever appears in the phenomenal world can not tell us anything directly about the noumenal world for the two are radically discontinuous. Consequently the “word of God” cannot be *identified* with anything which falls within our world of experience:

The Church is also in fact a sociological entity with definite historical and structural features. Preaching is also in fact an address. The sacrament is also in fact a symbol in compromising proximity to all other possible symbols. The Bible is also in fact the historical record of a Near Eastern tribal religion and its Hellenistic offshoot. Jesus Christ is also in fact the Rabbi of Nazareth who is hard to know historically and whose work, when He is known, might seem to be a little commonplace compared to more than one of the other founders of religions and even compared to some of the later representatives of His own religion. Nor should we forget that theology also, in so far as it uses human speech, is in fact a philosophy or a conglomerate of all kinds of philosophies.⁴⁹

Everything which falls within the world of human experience is explicable now or in the future in an imminent manner. Nothing *requires* the hypothesis of God. There are no general criteria by which events, people or writings can be identified as revelation or witnesses to revelation. The sovereign freedom of the Word of revelation forms an exact parallel with Kant’s view of the relation of human freedom to the phenomenal realm:



According to this Kantian scheme man (in his free noumenal selfhood) and God “cause” or identify with certain events in the phenomenal world. Yet these events are in no way *sui generis* – indeed they cannot be if they are phenomenally present. They can be seen as, and ought to be seen as, the consequences of previous phenomenal events. To see them thus is the central imperative of all scholarship and science. Not to push through such an analysis is to abandon reason and is

49 CD (1st edn) I/1, p. 188.

intellectual cowardice. There can be no place for apologetics because revelation can have no possible epistemological basis. Barth is content to let historical relativism do its worst. To recognise an event as a witness to revelation is not a possibility for the natural man, the phenomenal man, who has in himself no relation to the transcendent. The faith by which to recognise the witness to revelation has to be created in him from above. In Kantian terms until he has a noumenal selfhood added he cannot recognise or respond to revelation.⁵⁰ Barth's dialectical treatment of the Bible is clear in the following passage:

A thoughtful interpretation will be all the more careful and reverent with the biblical witness when its humanity is most clearly recognised: not for its own sake; not out of any magical respect for the letter, which as such is a letter like others; but out of respect for the object which has not been ashamed to raise up these human witnesses with their limitations and make use of this letter, and which we can know, if at all, only through this witness, and through the letter of this witness.

Zuidema's comment on this passage is illuminating:

Particular attention should be paid to the last part of this sentence. While at the beginning and also in the foregoing sentences Barth attempts to emphasize the fallible and humanly limited character of the writer and the text, so much so that in his opinion a contradictory relation exists between the text and the treasure which it is supposed to contain – a relationship which is a mystery and a miracle! – he concludes his long-winded account at last with the thesis that we too *can know* God precisely by way of the letter of that (human and all too human) witness... No wonder, then, that an American thought he detected a "sophisticated fundamentalism" in Barth, because Barth concedes what he claims and claims what he concedes, while giving the last word not to the concession of what is claimed but to the claim of what is conceded. In doing so, he does not differ one whit from the fundamentalism which he so despises.⁵¹

The label "sophisticated fundamentalism" is particularly apt for evangelical fundamentalism, as we have mentioned, works out of the same dualistic nature-grace ground-motive. On the whole, unsophisticated fundamentalism prefers a Thomistic relation between nature and grace, with nature as the preamble to grace. For example, Charles Hodge in his *Systematic Theology* (1871) maintains that "Reason Necessary for the Reception of Revelation," "Reason Must Judge The Credibility of a Revelation" and "Reason Must Judge the Evidences of Revelation" as some section headings put it. Two subsequent headings spell out the implications of this programme – "Philosophy and Theology Occupy Common Ground", and "Philosophers and Theologians Should Strive after Unity."⁵² However, when "reason" fails to play the preamble game then the fundamentalist is likely to retreat into more of a Tertullian-esque stance and assert "the Bible says..." in *contradiction* to the "fallen

50 There seems to be more than an analogy between Barth's view of faith as being a new creation and Aquinas's view of the *donum superadditum* given to man before the fall. In neither case is it seriously recognised that to be without Christian faith is not to be without faith *simpliciter* but rather for that faith to rest in substitutes for the Creator, namely in idols. Neither of them recognises the pervasive role of idolatry in non-Christian thought and culture.

51 Zuidema, *op cit.*, pp. 325-326, quoting *CD* III/1, p. 94.

52 *Systematic Theology*. London and Edinburgh: Nelson, 1871, vol. 1, pp. 49, 50, 53. For a superb critique see J. C. Vander Stelt. *Philosophy and Scripture: A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster*. Marleton, NJ: Mack, 1978.

wisdom of the world” and “vain philosophy.” Barth, in his “sophistication” eschews both unity and contradiction. Barth does not expect modern science and scholarship to provide any preamble to revelation. Indeed one could say that he recognises the “methodological atheism” of modern scholarship and in no way does he contradict it or suggest that ought to be replaced with a “methodological theism.” By its very nature this methodological atheism has the intention of leaving no gaps for revelation or God – that which had not yet been made immanently intelligible but a problem or anomaly to be resolved in immanent terms in due course. The scholarly ideal remains total immanent explanation and the scholar *qua* scholar can have no higher loyalty. The “semi-Barthian” sociologist Peter Berger makes the point as follows:

... sociological theory (and, indeed, any other theory moving within the framework of empirical disciplines) will always view religion *sub specie temporis*, thus of necessity leaving open the question whether and how it might *also* be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Thus sociological theory must, by its own logic, view religion as a human projection, and by the same logic, can have nothing to say about the possibility that this projection may refer to something other than the being of its projector. In other words, to say that religion is a human projection does not logically preclude the possibility that the projected meanings may have any ultimate status independent of man.⁵³

Such an all-but-suicidal concession of everything and then hanging onto the bare possibility that one of the projected meanings may actually correspond with reality immediately raises the question as to how one can know it is this one, that one, or any one. In that Barth has banned “apologetics” there is nothing which he can say either for his position or against other positions. Everything hangs on the Word of revelation from above. Without it there is nothing to commend faith in Christ and no one is culpable for rejecting the possibility or actuality of the word ... indeed it is the only intellectually coherent position. There is a real sense in which the coming of the Word creates incoherence... indeed a form of intellectual and spiritual schizophrenia. Barth typically seems to think of the theologian as the Christian to whom the Word has been revealed and of the philosopher, historian, psychologist, sociologist, etc. as being non-Christians. But what is the mandate of the *Christian non-theological scholar* for Barthianism? Should his confession of the Lordship of Christ make any difference to his scholarship? Has regeneration by the Spirit any epistemological significance? Or should he work with the existing presuppositions of scholarship... as he did before he became a Christian? Any plausibility that the passage above from Berger has, is that it trades on the possibility of complementary accounts of a situation. However, the logical compatibility of the sociological and the theological perspective changes immediately that one projected meaning is posited as having an ultimate status. This meaning is no longer a projection and now no other meaning is possibly true. Indeed the positive meaning will include an account of its own truth and the falsity of other meanings.⁵⁴ In the last analysis it may also reject as incompatible with its perspective the social phenomenological view of sociology promoted by Berger. With respect to

53 Berger, *The Sociological Reality of Religion*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, pp. 182-183.

54 Following the quoted passage, Berger recognises that it is possible to “invert” the projection view of religion and suggests that theology might explore this possibility – something which Barth never does. Berger writes: “Indeed, if a religious view the world is posited, the anthropological ground of these projections may itself be the reflection of a reality that *includes* both world and man, so that man’s ejaculations of meaning into the universe ultimately point to an all-embracing meaning in which he himself is grounded... Such a theological procedure, if feasible, would be interesting play on Feuerbach – the reduction of theology to anthropology would end in the reconstruction of

Barth the situation can be pointed up by asking whether the Christian archaeologist may legitimately spend his time looking for the body of Christ? Can the Christian historian or psychologist spend their time devising ingenious theories as to how the early church came to believe in the resurrection while excluding – in company with a non-Christian colleagues – *a priori* that the belief in the resurrection was the result of the fact of the resurrection. Or to put in other words – can the Christian give a reason for the hope that is in him to his non-Christian colleagues, a reason for not engaging in such scholarship? Although Barth's view of the resurrection is not without its obscurities it seems to be the case that for Barth the resurrection is an event which can only be seen by the eye of faith and was in no way visible to those without faith. Not only was the significance unknown but Barth seems quite unwilling to acknowledge any empirically available aspects to the resurrection such that those without faith would be confronted with at least circumstantial evidence.⁵⁵ While he polemicises against Bultmann's programme of demythologising it seems that Barth's sagas have as little connexion with external or empirical reality as Bultmann's myths. While Bultmann maintains that the myths must be interpreted existentially if they are not to be rejected by the standard of the "modern scientific worldview" Barth seems to want to hang on to his sagas by keeping them safely out of the way of science in the noumenal realm. Or to put it in its institutional terms, by insisting that the Church preserve the sagas as occasions of Divine-human encounter while asking nor expecting anything of the university but the sheer dismissal of the sagas. The university today without doubt plays the same role as did the church in mediaeval society. In that Barth is unable to call the university to repentance and redirection is theology is relevant to modern society in the sense of being fully adjusted to it... or at least how it was several decades ago. It is *neo-orthodoxy* rather *neo-orthodoxy*; in short it deserves Van Til's unappreciative label of the "new modernism." As we reach for stones let us not forget that modern evangelicalism is hardly less guilty... at least for the sin of omission, namely, of not developing a genuinely relevant orthodoxy for today which bears the healing of the gospel for man and society, for life and thought.

anthropology in a theological mode. Regretfully, I am not in a position to offer such an intellectual man-bites-dog feat here, but I want at least to suggest the possibility to the theologian." (p. 183)

55 On this see the valuable discussion in G. H. Clark, *Historiography, Secular and Religious*. Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1971, pp. 287-304 especially.