

Review:

Karl Barth Vs. Emil Brunner:

The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936

By John W. Hart

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In the year that Adolf Hitler assumed full power, and the Barmen Declaration was composed by the ‘Confessing Churches’ of Germany in response to the establishment of the ‘German [viz., Nazi] church’, Karl Barth sparked off what has proven to be one of the most memorable theological disputes of modern times with his ill-tempered *No! Answer to Emil Brunner* in response to Emil Brunner’s *Nature and Grace: A Contribution to the Discussion With Karl Barth*. Readers must then, as now, have choked over the self-description with which the one who penned the explosive *Romans* of 1922 opens the preface preceding his ‘Angry Introduction’: “I am by nature a gentle being and entirely averse to all unnecessary disputes.” While I imagine that Barth wrote this with a wry smile and by giving a knowing wink, there remains an important question to be asked concerning the type of theological ‘peace’ that Barth’s theology can bear.

It has been unfortunate that the bulk of the English-speaking theological world’s impression of Barth has been largely formed by this controversy. His rich theological work is frequently overlooked by those who regard him as at heart a polemicist (and a rude one at that) who could not converse with the modern world (and this has, of course, evangelistic consequences as Brunner recognised). In that setting John Hart’s study of the Barth-Brunner correspondence is most welcome, the fruit of his Oxford D.Phil. What he makes public are reflections on a set of materials largely unknown to those not engaged professionally in the study of Barth. Hence, it

is in fleshing out the broader context of the controversy in terms of the exchanges that Barth and Brunner had been engaged in since 1916, and in particular in assessing their relationship through their recently published correspondence, that Hart has provided a useful service. These are materials that, when read well, could provide the reassessment of this controversy that numerous Barth-scholars have for a few years now been suggesting is badly needed. The worry, however, is that Hart does not follow through radically enough its own suggestions.

The book's main merit lies in challenging the 'political reading' of the dispute, the kind of reading that takes one of two routes: that the spirit of the age (1) made Barth see demons where there were none; or (2) made him imagine they were larger and more dangerous than they really were. After all, one should recall, late in his life Barth reflected on how he would have handled the matter very differently had it occurred in the 1960s.

Hart rightly and importantly emphasises that Barth had been suspicious of Brunner over a decade earlier. In fact, ch 4 observes that late in 1920 "a parting of the way seemed likely. But, after reading *Romans II*, Brunner appeared to adopt Barth's radical dialectic." [207] "However, ... this was simply a temporary appropriation by Brunner – although up through *The Mediator* he could make very 'Barthian' statements, in fact Brunner had simply pasted Barthian dialectic onto his other fundamental commitments (Kantian critical Idealism, Kierkegaardian existentialism, Ebnerian personalism, and a traditional understanding of the Reformers). Since the radicalism of the Barthian dialectic did not lend itself to assimilation, as early as 1924-1925 (and certainly by 1929) Brunner began to slough it off, allowing his other commitments to come to the fore." [270f.] In fact, ch 1 traces the Barth-Brunner tension, in spite of the manifest alliance against the challenge of a common theological enemy, back to 1916. In 1918 Brunner was already charging Barth with

“one-sidedness”, while Barth was becoming increasingly concerned with the way Brunner related an Idealist philosophy to his material theological commitments. While this tension recedes somewhat in the early 1920s (ch 2), the influence of Ebner’s I-Thou philosophy served to intensify the differences in the late 1920s (ch 3) to breaking-point (ch 4). It is significant, then, that it is as late as ch 5 that Hart reaches the controversy of 1934. [Ch 6 covers the little-known dispute over the work of the Oxford Group Movement in the 1930s.]

Consequently, Hart argues that “Barth’s rejection of natural theology was grounded in theological, not political, reasons.” [2] Yet such a comment should come with a label-warning lest it *separate* politics and theology in a way that Barth was unable to do, as if for Barth theology was not always political, and politics always the politics of the human who is the one called by her Creator.

The book’s second main value resides in recognising that there were *real* issues at stake. For too long numerous British and N. American readers have taken uncritically Brunner’s claim that there was no difference except in Barth’s mind, only to miss Brunner’s subsequent slippage into asserting that *there is a difference at the semantic level*, and final slippage into admitting that *there is a difference at the material level*, only that Barth should have agreed with Brunner. Importantly Hart acknowledges and details Barth’s charge that Brunner had allowed a space to open up that was untouched by sin, and unread trinitarianly, that operates by way of a *preparation* for the reception of grace. Despite Brunner’s claim to the contrary, his *negative* natural theology was no less a *natural theology* than was a *positive* natural theology. More detailing here on Barth’s move against Kant would be instructive, as well as subvert readings that continue to insist that Barth’s rejection of natural theology was Kantianly performed. Brunner was more Kantian than Barth here, and

that debate with post-Kantian ‘modernity’ is highly significant to notice in reading the latter.

A third matter that I particularly appreciate about this study is its recognition of Brunner’s complicity in provoking Barth’s angry *Nein!* It was, after all, Brunner who initiated the dispute by writing his *Nature and Grace* in response to Barth’s farewell to the journal *Between the Times* in 1933. Moreover, and this too is largely missed by commentators, Brunner’s 1934 paper was patronising, inflammatory, and played for the acclaim of the German Christians by making Barth look foolish and ignorant.

Finally, extremely telling, especially since my own recent work has suggested that Barth can be considered a conversational theologian, is Hart’s recognition that, again contrary to general impression, Brunner’s missionary concerned ‘eristic theology’ (Greek *erizein* means ‘to debate’) does not converse well: “Although Brunner spent more time in conversation with non-Christian (or Neo-Protestant) philosophers, he engaged them to defeat them, not to learn from them. In contrast, at times Barth really listened and learned from modern philosophy (e.g., Overbeck, Feuerbach).” [212]

However, all is still not well with Hart’s Barth. He rather glibly claims, and therein significantly undermines his sense of the substance of the theological differences, that “these men represent two fundamentally different ways of doing theology” [42f.], “continually emphasiz[ing] different poles of the divine-human action” [41]. The problem is that, as far as Barth is concerned, Brunner is *doing theology* in a way that is, in fact, doing no theology at all but is rather creating an idol at an important point. Thus the controversy involves much more than a simple difference over how to affirm the sovereignty of God without swallowing up the

human, the radical and consistent outworking of the “*God is God and God is God*” motif of 1916.

What Hart, and he is far from alone in this, is distinctly weak in grasping is the sense in which the underlying correspondence has the whole of the God-world relations in view. In other words, that for Barth proper articulation of the “*God is God and God is God*” motif requires a corresponding ‘*creature is creature and creature is creature*’. It is important to notice the problematic dualism inherent in the competitive rendering of an ontology of the divine-human relations at the heart of Hart’s (mis)reading: Barth stresses the divine object, while Brunner emphasises the human subject. And this is not helped by his contrastive discourse of “dogmatics vs. philosophy, ... theology vs. anthropology”, theology and politics, and even continuity (Brunner vs. discontinuity (Barth) [4; cf. 208]. After all, what was Barth doing to the divine-human relations when developing his Christology throughout the second half of the 1920s and 1930s; his doctrine of election from the late 1930s; his doctrine of creation and anthropology in the mid 1940s; and his theology of the *simultaneous* movements of the Son’s way into the far country and his homecoming in the early 1950s? It is precisely this christic conception of the divine-human relations that has a subversive impact on theologies of the *humanum*, of reason, of creation developed in other ways. Consequently, to one who writes and speaks at great length on ethical and political matters; who produces a massive articulation of the human in *CD*, III.2 (and not only there); and whose ethics of reconciliation discuss, among other things, cultural, economic and social concerns, Hart appears just careless in claiming that “As a dogmatic theologian focusing on theology’s subject matter, Barth believed theology’s first question is always about the nature and being and activity of *God* – and since this is an exhaustive question, anthropology as a ‘second’ question can be deferred almost indefinitely. ... This is done without concern for theology’s

anthropological ‘relevance’, for God is not a predicate of human needs ... [and thereby], putting the second word in its proper place by not giving it much attention.” [215f.] There is certainly a certain kind of rhetorical air of unreality about *much* (but certainly not all) Barth’s discourse. But determining what and why that is is too simplistically located by Hart.

In the end Hart’s Barth looks at best but a shadow of the Swiss theologian, and at worst a darkened distortion of him, especially when, despite all that has gone before in the study (and, of course, *CD* II.2-IV.4 that the book has insufficiently grappled with), the concluding reflections disturbingly portray Barth as “a radical, all-or-nothing, either/or kind of person; he tended to embrace ‘one-sided’ positions. ... Barth was by nature a polemicist rather than one for dialogue.” [204] That this sounds more like a case of slipping into the stereotype should give one serious pause at this point at how deep the difficulty conversing with Barth still runs.

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