

## Introduction

# Reading Karl Barth Today: Conversational Theologian

### Conversing With Barth

#### *Conversing*

A few years ago when nearing the completion of my PhD I did some Masters degree level lecturing at a theological college north of Cambridge. One afternoon the college director informed me that he had been speaking to several academic theologians that week about my research and proceeded to report that there was no future for Barth studies – Barth’s day had come and gone. I am quite sure that there were a number of things going on there beyond mere opinion, but I do not intend to speculate on them now. One thing that is worth commenting on, though, is that since 1997 there has been a great number of books published particularly in English on Barth; a translation of Barth’s *Theology of the Reformed Confessions*; a new translation of his major text *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*; not to mention the German volumes of collected sermons, records of other public discussions, and various letters (most notably Barth’s correspondence with Emil Brunner). If ever there was a time when the study of Barth was a passing preoccupation, and Barth was being laid to rest, it certainly does not seem to be now. In an editorial for a 2000 issue of *International Journal of Systematic Theology* which was devoted to papers on Barth, John Webster observes that

Competent (in some cases outstanding) commentary on Barth is not uncommon; conferences abound; the Princeton Center for Barth Studies is now established. And, more than anything else, Barth is read, and read *in extenso*.<sup>1</sup>

While the form of theologians’ and scholars’ reception of Barth’s continuing presence does indeed differ – from dining and conversing with a welcome guest or attempting to flee from the intruder – it is true that the various redescriptions and engagements with this immense figure appears to be continuing unabated. Perhaps more than any other period, now that hindsight may be invoked in the cause of reading and assessing, some particularly interesting readings and debates are developing, those that respect Barth’s fear not to be

uncritically repeated.<sup>2</sup> Will Barth be *appreciated* for what he achieved, yet without any superficial identical appropriation of his thought? There are signs to give one hope – in particular, readings of Barth’s socialist-learned theological politics, and the Barth who can navigate postmodern discourse. Barth’s place in theological history is assured,<sup>3</sup> and so too is his place in becoming a conversation partner in the present. But the conversations with Barth are still, in an important sense, only really in their infancy now that more attention is being paid to his wide-ranging and extensive corpus.

Of course, the notion that Barth can become a *conversation* partner in the present is heavily metaphorical. George Pattison declares that “Thinking about God is not the business of technicians, but a matter of dialogue between embodied, living voices.”<sup>4</sup> But the manner of Barth’s conversational embodiment is that of the written text, and there is a sense in which texts cannot speak back and interrupt the flow of our misreadings, interacting with us in the same way that conversationalists can.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, they cannot argue their case against our misappropriations and rejections of the texts’ contents. Nevertheless, texts can and do stand as objective ‘others’ over against us, refusing in some sense to be contained by any particular reading as is demonstrated by disagreements over textual sense by readers [Barth declares that writing has a certain ‘objective’ authority as compared to orality which means that the church is reminded that it is not in conversation with itself (*CD*, I.1, 106)]. Texts, in other words, make argument possible, and provide sources for a kind of conversation.

Two further points must be made at the outset of this course – that the range of his theological imagination and its legacy make him a theologian *worth conversing with*; and that the massiveness of Barth’s oeuvre make him a theologian needing to be conversed with *carefully*.

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<sup>1</sup> John Webster, ‘Editorial’, *IJST* 2 (2000), 125-6 (126).

<sup>2</sup> Barth himself had hoped that his thinking would not be slavishly followed, or that a theological school would be formed in his name. See, e.g., Karl Barth, in *Karl Barth’s Table Talk*, ed. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), 12.

<sup>3</sup> In the academic session 2000-1, the website of the Princeton Center for Barth Studies took pride in the fact that Barth, ranking fifth among such notable figures as evangelist Billy Graham, Mother Theresa, and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., was the only academic theologian to make the top ten in a recent poll in *Christian History* of the most influential Christians of the last century.

<sup>4</sup> George Pattison, *The End of Theology- And the Task of Thinking About God* (London: SCM Press, 1998), x, xi.

<sup>5</sup> “Live conversation is, we might say, orchestral, whereas the writer is, inevitably, a soloist” [Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, **Year**), 6].

## *'With Barth': One Well Worth Conversing With!*

Barth was born in 1886, a period during which the state acquisition of power and wealth through imperialist expansion began to create certain tensions among the European superpowers. But the road to war in 1914 would not have been so generally felt. It was a time of optimism, of confidence in scientific excellence, and so on. Speaking of the two following decades Timothy Gorringer observes that

These were exciting years to be a student in Germany, which understood itself, with some justice, to stand in the forefront of cultural progress. Einstein formulated the Special Theory of Relativity in 1905, and Nils Bohr outlined Quantum Theory in 1914. Bruckner, Mahler, and Richard Strauss were expressing musically what expressionists were attempting to say in art. Max Reinhardt was the leading director in Berlin, and in the year Barth went there Rilke published one of his most famous works.<sup>6</sup>

- Barth's theological development and his responses to the time in which he lived alone should make him an interesting theological figure. Noteworthy is, in particular, his critical response to liberalism and his advocacy of a theology that relearns to engage with and relearn from the history of its thinking, is a move that has led several commentators on the postmodern theological scene to declare the contemporary relevancy of Karl Barth. So the relation of the post-1916 Barth to theological liberalism is an important area of Barth study. Gary Dorrien, for instance, comments that

Barthian theology was a highly creative blend of Reformationist, orthodox, and liberal modernist elements.... [F]or all their blistering rhetoric against Schleiermacher's children, all of the major proponents of theological neoorthodoxy remained importantly *rooted in the tradition of nineteenth-century theological liberalism*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford and New York: OUP, 1999), 24f.

<sup>7</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology: Theology Without Weapons* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 2, my emphasis. Dorrien's talk of 'neo-orthodoxy', however, is deeply problematic, at least as far as referring to Barth is concerned. Firstly, it tends to freeze Barth into a categorisable and narrowly identifiable project; secondly, it lumps Barth together with thinkers with whom Barth certainly shared much, and looked close to theologically, *from a certain perspective*, but with whom he differed significantly on substantial matters that cannot be easily relegated to the periphery of theological concern, and thus looked far from theologically, *from another perspective*; thirdly, it implies that Barth's is both a return to, and yet a rewriting of, 'orthodoxy' – a point that is fair enough in one sense, but in another can suggest that 'orthodoxy' is something historically stable and achieved, the development of which is therefore something *past* consequently needing only now to be reaffirmed and defended. It is worth quoting Denys Turner at this point: "one reason why an appeal to tradition could never consist in a simple authoritative *repetition* of past formulae, dogmatic or otherwise, is the obvious, and well-rehearsed reason, namely that such repetitions are in any case

In contrast to this, John Webster argues that Barth *abandoned* theological liberalism and adopted “a quite different set of commitments.”<sup>8</sup> Webster tends to follow Barth’s own rhetorical depiction of his ‘conversion’ which suggests something of a total loss of the ‘old’ in the discovery of the wholly ‘new’.

This distancing of himself from his ‘theological neighbours’ [at the end of the 1920s] was part of a larger process whereby Barth rid himself of vestiges of his theological inheritance, and articulated a theological identity formed out of biblical and dogmatic habits of thought with rigorous consistency and with a certain exclusiveness.<sup>9</sup>

This, then, is an area of interest – not merely for historical reasons, but for thinking through the range of theological conversations that one committed to the Self-giving of God in Jesus Christ, the gracious divine Self-speakability, as Barth was, can have.

- Barth’s political involvement makes him an interesting figure – WWI; ‘Red Pastor’ at Safenwil; Nazism; Communism. John Webster argues that

More perhaps than any other Protestant leader in Germany at the time [mid 1930s], Barth was free of the desire to retain the social and cultural prestige of the church at any price, and could bring to bear on the events of the Nazi takeover a startlingly clear theological position in which the church was wholly defined by its confession

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always ‘non-identical’ .... Another way of putting that is to say that one can argue from either end of a tradition with the other; or from the middle of it with either end; but in any case doing so is always a *present* appropriation of the tradition by means of argument. In short, the *only* way to rehearse the ancient is by doing something new, because the tradition has never argued, or been argued with, in quite that way before. ... By such a means a tradition is less ‘appealed to’ than reworked, for only in the medium of new questions does a tradition live. But by mere repetition does a tradition farcically die.” [‘Tradition and Faith’, *IJST* 6 (2004), 21-36 (22, 36)]

<sup>8</sup> John Webster, ‘Introducing Barth’, in John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-16 (3).

<sup>9</sup> Webster, ‘Introducing Barth’, 5. In this way Webster can claim that “the driving force of Barth’s development before the *Church Dogmatics* was specifically theological; his mind was shaped by his reading of the Bible and by his intense scrutiny of the classical traditions of Christian theology and their modern offspring.” [ibid., 13] Webster is more careful at other points on Barth’s own indebtedness to modern theology. For instance, he argues that “Barth’s relationship to modernity is very complicated, and it is too easy to reduce the complexities by making him appear to be either merely dismissive and reactionary or a kind of mirror image of modernity who never shook himself free of its grip. ... Barth was in conversation with his nineteenth-century heritage .... [I]t must not be forgotten that there is substantial continuity, in that, as Barth put it, ‘the nineteenth century’s tasks remain for us, too’. In Barth, then, we will encounter a thinker who was both deeply indebted to the intellectual traditions of modernity and also their rigorous critic. If Barth dismantled modern Protestant theology as it developed in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he did so from the inside.” [Webster, ibid., 11f.]

of Jesus Christ as ‘the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death’.<sup>10</sup>

Barth’s, as we shall see later in our reflections, is a theologico-politics that undoes the neat dualistic divisions between theology and ethics, God and world, private and public – dualisms that have unfortunately all too often been nourished on theological grounds, and hampered the required scope of a theology engaged in testifying to the God made flesh for the redemption of the creaturely.

- The range of Barth’s theological imagination is expansive, and repays study. He engaged with the range of liberal theological thinkers, and in *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* with their philosophical forebears (several of these essays have been praised by philosophical specialists); with the early church Fathers, and the mediaeval (it is frequently admitted among experts that Barth’s attempt to understand Thomas Aquinas is unsuccessful); the Reformed reformulations of theology, and their early modern scholastic successors. That is not to mention Barth’s passion for Mozart, his book on whom has been well received by musicologists; and his wide range of reading of modern philosophy; and his sustained engagement with the scriptures and the history of their interpretation, and so on. All of this was done not in order to give Barth easy targets to shoot down, but in an expansive and joy-filled understanding of what it means to hear God’s speaking in theological testing of the church’s preaching. Hans Frei, late professor of theology at Yale Divinity School, once remarked,

one has the impression that Barth was a man for whom overt force of character and the exercise of vocation, rather than internal self-consciousness, self-probing or the tensions of ‘self-transcendence’ were the hallmarks of being human and of his own humanity.<sup>11</sup>

### *Needing to be Conversed With Carefully!*

Barth is an intriguing thinker. Certainly that is by no means the only thing that should be said about him. Commentators, after all, queue up to announce his influence – and, despite the predictions to the contrary in certain places, that seems to be an enduring one. Yet I want to insist that that he is indeed an intriguing figure, a puzzle in many ways.

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<sup>10</sup> John Webster, *Barth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 8, citing Article 1 of the Barmen Theological Declaration from A.C. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 239.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 150.

Frei once famously quipped that any attempts to grasp Barth would result in the object of the grasping turning to dust.<sup>12</sup> There are perhaps two reasons for this, both combining to create the possibility of a certain kind of *limited* response to Barth's theologising. The first is suggested by a point of Webster's: "Barth's work has, with some exceptions, not become part of the general theological culture, even in German-speaking Protestantism."<sup>13</sup> If there was a more general familiarity with his theology then it would be received in more interesting and constructive ways than is often the case. The second is by far the more important: that of the nature of the scale and style of Barth's writing. His *magnum opus*, the unfinished thirteen volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, is all-too rarely studied with the requisite skill, breadth and depth. Consequently, shallow readings abound which routinely misconstrue his theological commitments, some really quite seriously, and often his work is reduced to the sound-bite slogan. This poverty of reading was already occurring during Barth's own lifetime. In his preface to the English translation of Otto Weber's study, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics*, Barth bitingly asks:

Am I deceived when I have the impression that I exist in the phantasy of far too many ... mainly, only in the form of certain, for the most part hoary, summations, of certain pictures of hastily dashed off by some person at some time, and for the sake of convenience, just as hastily accepted, and then copied endlessly, and which, of course, can easily be dismissed?<sup>14</sup>

A kind of convenient and all-too hasty grasping at Barth has been what certain scholars have attempted to do with their searching for 'keys' to the Barthian corpus, the single theme that will unlock the manifold doors of Barth's theology. The corridors of the *Church Dogmatics* (CD) alone are labyrinthine; and we must also not forget the important other books, articles, addresses, sermons and letters, composed and collected in their hundreds. George Hunsinger outlines several keys that certain influential commentators have discovered:<sup>15</sup>

- Christocentrism and the *analogia entis* (Hans Urs von Balthasar);
- theology of the Word (T.F. Torrance);
- the triumph of grace (G.C. Berkouwer);

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<sup>12</sup> **Reference**

<sup>13</sup> Webster, *Barth*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, 'Foreword to the English Translation', in Otto Weber, *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), 7.

<sup>15</sup> George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York and Oxford: OUP, 1991), Prologue.

- time and eternity (Richard H. Roberts);
- the absolute priority of Jesus Christ (Robert W. Jenson).

However, the multiplicity of possible keys lead Hunsinger to a disciplined despair over this kind of project. Where the discipline in the despair lies is in the fact that he has perceived several motifs simultaneously existing in Barth's work, and for that reason he moves beyond the loci approach of Herbert Hartwell, despite his preference for this over the singular 'key' approach:

- actualism (radical priority given to the event of God's act),
- particularism (redefine all theological conceptions in relation to Jesus Christ, and thereby refuse general methodological concerns within which Christianity is subsequently fitted),
- objectivism (revelation and salvation are given by God quite apart from human beings' subjective responses – there is something above us and beyond us),
- personalism (God deals with human beings in personal terms – through the encounter of address and invitation),
- realism (analogical understanding of religious language, really referential but not directly so),
- and rationalism (theological discussion is rational and cognitive, and needs appropriate criteria appropriate [internal] to faith for interpretation).

What this amounts to is the suggestion that Barth's compositions are too rich to be played in a single key. The symphonic metaphor used by John Bowden and hinted at by Hunsinger's comparison with Mozart is suggestive here.<sup>16</sup> It can be reasonably argued that Barth's own thinking manifests a symphonic structure. Webster's summary is helpful at this point:

Commentators often note the musical structure of Barth's major writings: the announcement of a theme, and its further extension in a long series of developments and recapitulations, through which the reader is invited to consider the theme from a number of different angles and in a number of different relations. No one stage of the argument is definitive: rather, it is the whole which conveys the substance of what he has to say. As a result, Barth's views on any given topic cannot be

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<sup>16</sup> John Bowden, *Karl Barth*, (London: SCM Press, 1971), 24; cf. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 28.

comprehended in a single statement (even if the statement is one of his own), but only in the interplay of a range of articulations of a theme.<sup>17</sup>

For Barth, then, no one stage of the argument is definitive for the whole – instead, he plays a theme, develops it in certain directions and returns to it in a way that reworks it, or introduces other themes into his playing of the focal theme.<sup>18</sup> This pattern occurs endlessly.

In his lectures on in the Cambridge tripos paper on modern theology, David Ford in 1994 follows just such an admission of the dynamic exchanges between doctrines in the movement of Barth's dogmatics, that each doctrine can be pulled through every other so that there is no securely stabilised 'core' or 'centre' as such, by suggesting that the "Architecture of the *Church Dogmatics* is important".<sup>19</sup> As Barth himself declares,

We must hold out the possibility of beginning a dogmatics with any doctrine, for instance, with the doctrine of the Church, or with the topic in Calvin's Book III: sanctification, or even a universal doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we might even begin with the Christian man!<sup>20</sup>

John Godsey had reflected on the theological significance of the *CD*'s architecture in 1956. Godsey is right to observe that the very shape of the *CD* is itself theologically significant.<sup>21</sup> After all, Barth had aborted his 1927 *Christliche Dogmatik* project because of

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<sup>17</sup> Webster, *Barth*, 13f.

<sup>18</sup> Webster, 'Introducing Barth', 9: "As a result, Barth's views on any given topic cannot be comprehended in a single statement (even if the statement be one of his own), but only in the interplay of a range of articulations of a theme."

<sup>19</sup> David Ford, lecture delivered on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1994 at the Faculty of Divinity, the University of Cambridge. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 27: "No one ever seems to have had a stronger sense that in Christian theology every theme is connected to every other theme. It is as if he envisioned the whole subject of Christian theology as forming one great and many-faceted crystal." Unfortunately this crystalline metaphor fares no better than the architectonic one in terms of displaying something of the dynamism of the *CD*'s performance. It would not be unrealistic to draw on the analogy of Barth's perichoretic trinitarianism instead – that allows for the endless reconfigurations of the movement of one-to-another, while ruling out the project of digging for a hermeneutical treasure of an isolatable map or key to the *CD*. As Hunsinger says, such "is unlikely to be found" [Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 3].

Barth himself does use the image of a 'centre' – "Christian truth is like a globe, where every point points to the centre." [*Table Talk*, 13] This needs to be understood ontologically, though – that all truth is generated by, and participates in, the Truth that God is in God's Self – rather than epistemically, as if Christian theology can articulate a 'centre' that never changes, shifts, or is reconfigured with every modification of the orbiting matters.

<sup>20</sup> Barth, *Table Talk*, 13. The form that this comments takes is highly significant – Barth had earlier opposed anthropocentric theology, and claimed in no uncertain terms that theology, if it was to be true to what it is to properly be, is to be theocentric, and that done and learned christocentrically. Barth is, in 1963, admitting that the human cannot be left out of account. Indeed, rather than counting this as a shift in Barthian theology, perhaps it would be better to claim that it is an explication of that which remained implicit – a theological anthropology (Barth's later theology remains opposed to an anthropocentric theology, which is a very different matter altogether).

<sup>21</sup> John Godsey, 'The Architecture of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*', *SJT* 9 (1956), 236-250. This article is represented in the introduction to Karl Barth, *Table Talk*, 1-12. Barth's very architecture asks serious questions



concerns with its shape and theological flavour tone, and the subsequent project of *Church dogmatics*, first launched into print in 1932, already signals a subtle specification of intent.<sup>22</sup> So the very structure of the *CD* itself reveals much about the theology Barth is presenting, particularly significant in its recasting the “pre-established mould” which the Christian Faith has been forced into” by post-Enlightenment modernity.<sup>23</sup> Hence, although Barth’s *CD I* is understood by him to be a ‘concession’ to a modernity obsessed with abstracted methodology and starting-point, the very fact that it opens with an account of the triune shape of the revelation in which theological rationality is generated and participates, is a radical move in the context of modern academic theology. Consequently, the *CD*, because of its meticulous theological planning and skill,

is a bold yet humble attempt to unite a systematic theology which conforms to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. As such, the architectural plans must necessarily result from obedient and faithful listening to the Word of God spoken to the Church, and all future designs must remain fluid and prepared for unexpected changes.<sup>24</sup>

However, attention to the *architecture* of the *CD* may well miss the rich energy of the flow and the liveliness of the presentation in Barth’s work. Barth himself in the series of discussions recorded by John Godsey and published under the title *Table Talk* warns of applying construction-type metaphors to his dogmatics.<sup>25</sup> They are, he remonstrates, too static in their theological structuration, identifying an immobile edifice or system that captures and suffocates the soul of his theological performance with a singular and stultifying architectonic.

This is all highly suggestive of:

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about what can be done, theologically speaking, *remoto christo*, as in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo?* – although it is important to note that what Anselm was doing here is a matter of considerably intense debate.

<sup>22</sup> From the outset Barth makes it clear that theology is bound to the sphere of the church and is only understandable and meaningful within its borders – indeed, Barth’s theologising arises and is shaped largely by a pastoral concern in a concrete ministry, leading “to a dogmatics in which the Church is not simply reflecting, but is in conversation with itself.” [Godsey, 237] Theology is, for him, a church activity, determined by service for the promotion of the glory of God, and thus is not an end in itself but receives its justification (and sanctification, of course) from the Christian community [for a fuller discussion of this, see G.W. Bromiley, ‘Theology as Service in Karl Barth’, in Trevor A. Hart and Daniel P Thimell (eds.), *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World. Essays Presented to James Torrance* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), 133-151].

<sup>23</sup> Godsey, 236.

<sup>24</sup> Godsey, 236. 239f.: “In other words, the architecture shows us that we begin with God and not man, with the reality of revelation and not its possibility. The special way of knowledge of the Christian Faith, then, is not grounded in any capability or possibility of man, but in God’s own sovereign freedom. Man can know God only because God makes Himself known to man...: God reveals Himself as Lord.”

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Table Talk*, 13.

- The richness that bears an artistic witness to the excessiveness of the life of the triune God.
- The fact that theology performs its witness in its particular time – a ‘not yet’ even if it is set as such by a founding ‘already’. In other words, Barth’s theology bears a sense of its eschatological provisionality and thus needs to be open to constant revision. This revisability is perhaps well expressed in the *development* that occurs in Barth’s thinking – his thinking never stands still.<sup>26</sup>
- The agency of the listener, becoming active as participant in the music’s very dynamics.

Thus, how Barth gets to his argument, his style, is theologically demonstrative. He once revealingly likened theology to a snapshot of a bird in flight, unable to ‘capture’ the spirit of the beauty of the rhythm, the movement of the flight, and the wonder evoked by viewing the event. This photographic portrayal of the theological is later supplemented by a famous image used in the twilight of his theological career. In *Evangelical Theology* he speaks of the wonder and fragility of theology, its joyful moving in awe and its carefulness not to claim too much for itself. The theologian he claimed is likened to one’s gazing at a mountain while walking endlessly around its foot. That is why he elsewhere insists that the danger that he may be repeated in some theological Barth-scholasticism is to be firmly resisted, for the sake of the health of the church. “The Church’s *continuing* function of writing dogmatics cannot be relinquished! A living Church will have a living dogmatics.”<sup>27</sup> It is in the movement of theology, its inability to stand still for too long lest it forget its partialising perspectivism and the non-idolisable uncontrollability of its ‘object’, that can make reading Barth such an exciting adventure and commenting on him such a perilous and frustrating task.

It is the very vastness of his oeuvre, and the necessity of reading the whole in order to understand the part in his “labyrinthine argument”, and the flow that makes a resorting to simplifications and singular moments so tempting. So, paralleling the search for the ‘keys’ has been the *slogansing* of Barth. Barth has become known as

– ‘neo-orthodox’,<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> It comes as no surprise that David Ford advised me to begin my doctoral research on Barth by beginning with *CD* II and IV, only then moving into I and III.

<sup>27</sup> Barth, *Table Talk*, 12f.

<sup>28</sup> Despite the difficulty of using this term of Barth, as mentioned earlier, Gary Dorrien persists in using it.

- ‘christomonist’,
- ‘revelational positivist’,
- ‘occasionalist’,
- ‘universalist’,
- ‘irrationalist’,
- denier of biblical inspiration (that, therefore, is tantamount for many to denying the authority of scripture itself), and so on.

Particularly among Evangelical theological students the name of Karl Barth is greeted with such cries, as if one’s whole work can be tied to the mast of a soundbite or two, and the terribly difficult task of seriously engaging with that corpus. Whether Barth was guilty of whatever such slogans might mean, the absurdity of dismissing him lightly is obvious when the depth and complexity of his massive *oeuvre* is considered, and the fact that Barth, whatever his flaws – and he was himself not averse to believing that he had many – is a massively important theological intellect, a colossus of twentieth century theology.

To Bromiley, in 1961, Barth complains that certain questioners have superficially ignored his writings’ details, because “They are closed to anything else” than their orthodoxy, and “they will cling to it at all costs.”<sup>29</sup> Precisely such a failure to listen attentively does characterise many critiques of Barth, most notably those of the “hasty theological journalism” of the Barth-sloganisers.<sup>30</sup> Much, of what passes for Barth-scholarship, or at least commentary on Barth, then, fashions a ‘straw man’ who is rendered helpless against critical assault by the nature of the reading, a figure whose apparently one-sided theological presentation actually bears little resemblance to the complex movements and counter-movements, recapitulations and contrasting themes of the symphonically-charged style of the *CD*’s composer. The danger of pinning Barth’s thoughts to any single mast is that when one turns around Barth will have slipped free.

There is a second problem worth highlighting with the sloganising of Barth, and it has to do with a politics of theological ‘power’. With any sound-bite, the advertising jingle, or logo, the rhetoric is designed to simplify matter in such a way that excludes a lot without there being any sense of a need for any deeper understanding of what is being excluded and why. All-too often in the reception of Barth’s writings that is precisely what happens. More often than not, those who accuse Barth of irrationalism and the like do not see the difficulties in

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<sup>29</sup> Karl Barth, *Karl Barth: Letters, 1961-1968*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 7f., letter dated 1 June 1961.

<sup>30</sup> Barth, 1953, 8.

their own versions of rationality, miss the fact that Barth refused to play (for theological reasons) the games they play, and consequently they evade the challenge that Barth puts to modern theology.<sup>31</sup>

Chapter 3, ‘The Strange New World Creating Its Own Familiarity: Some Reflections on Barth’s Rejection of Natural Theology’, tackles this matter through some reflections on Barth’s negation of the possibility of ‘natural theology’. It was originally composed in direct response to a rather lightweight paper entitled ‘Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology’, and the very shallowness of its reading of Barth is telling of precisely what mistakes theologians can make in their reading of Barth when insufficiently engaged in a more substantive and generous conversation with him.<sup>32</sup> **Detail argument**

While recent studies of Barth have tended to become, on the whole, more appreciative of, careful with, and attentive and generous to, the complexity and subtly nuanced way Barth does theology, the hasty journalism he lamented in the 1960s remains ignorantly undaunted in certain quarters. It is by way of illustrating just this that I have included as an appendix an expanded version of a review of the republished *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* by Gordon H. Clark. While this is included in *appended* place, and thus kept apart from the more substantive theological discussions in the preceding chapters, it is included precisely in order to suggest what conversing with Barth should not ever look like on the part of a Christian theologian. The 1997 foreword by John W. Robins is not only an extremely problematic reading of Barth, but is shockingly abusive and irresponsible.

### *As He Converses*

What Nicholas Lash has quite recently claimed about the nature of theological learning applies well to the concerns of this book about theology done in conversation:

Learning to tell the truth takes time, attentiveness, and patience. Good learning calls no less than teaching does, for courtesy, respect, a kind of reverence; reverence for facts and people, evidence and argument, for climates of speech and patterns of behaviour different from our own. There are, I think, affinities between the courtesy, the attentiveness, required for friendship; the passionate disinterestedness without which no good scholarly or scientific work is done; and the contemplativity

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<sup>31</sup> When a church has been present in a culture for a long period of time the danger that it can lose its understanding of its relation to culture in terms of missionary encounter intensifies. That is precisely what Barth sees as having happened in these particular versions of theological rationality. On this see John C. McDowell, ‘A Response to Rodney Holder on Barth on Natural Theology’, *Themelios*, 27.2 (2002), 32-44. On ‘Evangelicalism’, see the Appendix to this introductory chapter.

which strains, without credulity, to listen for the voice of God – who speaks the Word He is, but does not shout. [Nicholas Lash, 'Cacophany and Conversation', *The 2002 Prideaux Lectures* delivered at Exeter University]

Webster, however, rightly relates that “many readers of Barth find in him an unpalatable assertiveness, what Tillich called ‘a demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people, not caring whether they can accept it or not’.”<sup>33</sup> And, indeed, there are times when Barth sounds assertive and all-knowing.

This is essentially something more than a criticism of stylistic manner. The problem is theological, and consequently places serious obstacles in the way of speaking of Barth in terms of a conversational theology. It is here that I would refer the reader to chapter 1, ‘Theology as Conversational Event: Karl Barth, the Ending of “Dialogue” and the Beginning of “Conversation”’. This is an expanded version of my contribution to that ‘Introduction’, published in *Modern Theology* in 2003, and lays out both the grounds of what is meant by ‘theology done in conversation’, and suggests just how far it makes sense when used as a way of reading the vast of *oeuvre* of Karl Barth, especially in the light of the readings of Richard Roberts, James Barr and Clark Pinnock. It argues that these readings are problematic in the assumptions that they bring to bear on Barth’s texts, and therefore in the Barth they ‘discover’ therein. This is not, à la Roberts *et al*, a slipping of a key into the Barthian backdoor while no-one is looking – put like that, ‘conversation’ just is too multi-faceted and dynamic to be a *singularly specifiable control* for theological reading. But what it is to suggest is that ‘conversation’ is indeed, as was argued earlier, a good regulating performative metaphor for the doing of theology and not merely for theology’s public presentation.

There are certainly pressures in Barth’s work towards the disruption of conversation. Bringing him into conversation with others provides a good way not only of detecting these pressures, but of seeing both what is at stake and fining provisionally possible ways of offering repair. That is what is attempted in chapter 5, ‘Mend Your Speech a Little’: Reading Karl Barth’s *Das Nichtige* Through Donald MacKinnon’s Tragic Vision’. **Explain**

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<sup>32</sup> Rodney Holder, ‘Karl Barth and the Legitimacy of Natural Theology’, *Themelios* 26 (2001), 22-37.

<sup>33</sup> Webster, *Barth*, 14, citing Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 186.