

Seminar 9

Critical Conversations in Our World: Karl Barth's Socialist Politics Against the Stream

Reading:

- Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, 205-260.
- Karl Barth, 'The Christian's Place in Society', in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 272-327.

Introduction

Very few textbooks on systematic theology have independent sections on ethics and/or politics. Daniel Migliore's excellent *Faith Seeking Understanding* is something of an exception to this rule, although even here his chapter 'Political Theology: A Dialogue' is relegated to his final *appendix* (Appendix C). What is going on here?

No simple answer can be given to this questions, and I would want to suggest that there are at least two possible responses:

1. Theology as God-talk does not deal explicitly with ethical matters, and therefore these should be left to textbooks specifically on ethics (dogmatics-ethics duality)
2. Ethics can only be properly done by the theologian as theological ethics (ethics as dogmatics)

The first response can cover a wide range of different 'theological' positions and their relation to the political (broadly, the public polity of the ethics of governance) –

- Kant – dogmatics as ethics
- Lutheranism's 'two kingdoms'
- Popular evangelicalism's inwardness and *spirituality*¹

The relationship between theology and politics has often been an uneasy one. Jesus' command to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" and Paul's request for submission to the ruling authorities (Rom 13) came under particular strain during periods of persecution of Christians by the imperial government as Christian notions of submission took on different significance. But notice that even here the form of resistance generally taken was that of submission to the physical consequences of denying the ultimacy of the imperial power – martyrdom. The *Revelation According to St. John*, for instance, is one of many texts that urges Christians not lose their faith in the Gospel when challenged by the demonic power.

For the post-Constantian church, the theological politics was often markedly different, so much so that the church's politics all-too-often adopted the shape and form of those of governing empires.

Karl Barth belongs to the Reformed theological tradition, with its early Calvinist form of Genevan theocracy, and had learned much from the liberal rendering of that tradition. As such, the two kingdoms notion or Pietistic inwardness/spiritualism do not seem to have appealed to him from even an early stage in his theological development. *A non-political Christianity is impossible – it is untrue to the God revealed in Jesus Christ*. So what he develops is a perspective on ethics (including therefore politics) that is theologically founded, constituted and

¹ There is also an individualism operative here – for instance, in the presently running *Alpha Course* one of the sessions is entitled 'How Can I Resist Evil?'

regulated (ethics as dogmatics), that is socially concerned (rather than concerned with oneself).² For Barth, theology is political simply when it has responded appropriately to the dynamics of its own themes: the trinitarian God, creation, christology, reconciliation, redemption, and so on. In the words of Oliver O'Donovan,

to speak about these has involved theologians in speaking of society, and has led them to formulate normative political ends. They have turned out to know something about the ends of politics, and perhaps about the means, too, without needing to be told. It is not a question of adapting to alien requirements or subscribing to external agenda, but of letting theology be true to its task and freeing it from a forced and unnatural detachment.³ ... Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical. Rule out the political questions and you cut short the proclamation of God's saving power; you leave people enslaved where they ought to be set free from sin – their own sin and others.⁴

Timothy Gorringer's excellent study puts matters like this:

What cannot be doubted is that Barth *believed* that, *precisely as a theologian*, he was making a contribution to the struggle against Hitler.⁵

And it is in so doing that, as Jehle declares, is "one of the most significant political and moral philosophers of the twentieth century." [Jehle, 6]

Receptions of Barth's Theologico-Politics

It seems more than merely strange that numerous commentators feel that, in the words of Langdon Gilkey, Barth's "theology presupposed a stark and real separation between the Church and the world, between belief and unbelief, between the Word of God and the secular".⁶ Gilkey continues by claiming that the problem "stems fundamentally ... from this split between our existence in the secular world ... on the one hand, and a theological language, on the other, that has had no essential touch with that world."

Some Facts About Barth's Theologico-Politics

- Learned from Herrmann and Harnack who were both politically conservative
- Gorringer recognises the anti-bourgeois flavour of much of the political spirit pre-WWI

² See the above footnote. Kant's ethics, of course, began with the question 'what ought I do?'

³ This means that the relation between theology and politics is precisely not a politics *and* theology, as if theology is an addendum to an otherwise formulatable political ethic: "Christian ethics is *Christian* – that is, not a variant of some generic human morality, but concerned with that form of life which I established by God in Jesus Christ and commanded in the proclamation of the Christian gospel. It is, accordingly, a distinctively theological discipline, appealing to the same givens and governed by the same norms as Christian doctrine." [Webster, 2000, 147f.] But, in the second place, the relation is not one of theology *and* ethics, as if ethics is an addendum or irrelevant to theology: "dogmatics is always ethical dogmatics, always concerned to elucidate how the indicative of Christian faith encounters us as moral imperative." [Webster, 2000, 148]

⁴ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 3. John Webster: Barth's is "a set of attempts, not to abandon moral and political activity, but to reorient it by directing attention to its ground in the activity of God which is attested in the Christian Gospel and articulated in Christian theology." [Barth, 143f.]

⁵ Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, 20.

⁶ Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 102f.

- Barth takes up his ministerial practice on behalf of his poorer parishioners in Safenwil
- 1911 lecture, 'Jesus Christ and the Social Movement'
- Came to be influenced by the Religious Socialist, Leonhard Ragaz, who had argued in 1903 that "official Christendom" was "cold and uncomprehending" with respect to "building a new world", when Christians should be "on the side of the poor and developing classes."⁷ It was only on 26th January 1915, however, that he officially joined the Social Democratic Party.

Precisely because I am trying Sunday by Sunday to speak about last things, I could no longer allow myself to personally float in the clouds above the present evil world, rather it had to be demonstrated right now that faith in the Greatest does not exclude but rather includes work and suffering in a realm which is not yet complete.⁸

- That socialist praxis helped prepare Barth for his 'break' with liberalism 1914-16 – ethical concerns that he felt his liberal education insufficiently prepared him to cope with
- Barth reacted to the theology of the war (*Kriegstheologie*): Barth's teacher Adolf von Harnack was an advisor to Kaiser Wilhelm II when the latter composed his call "To the German Nation!" on August 6th, 1914. It concluded:

We will fight to the last breath of man and beast. We will win this battle even if we must fight against a world of enemies. Never before has Germany been defeated when it was united. Forward with God who will be with us as he was with our fathers!"⁹

Nationalistic concerns were her immediately linked with God.

- Yet, as Barth wrote to Martin Rade, there was a "double insanity" with the "capitulation of the German Social Democrats" – in Aug 1914 they approved of the war credit requested by the Reichstag. From that moment on, socialism could not under any circumstances be interpreted as a "proleptic appearance of the Kingdom of God."¹⁰
- 1919 Tambach lecture – Barth's farewell to Religious Socialism' – post Barth's disillusionment with the form and direction of the Russian Revolution
- 1922 *Romans II* – Barth on the 'Great negative possibility' – the Wholly Other's (*der ganz Andere*) Revolution, to deny the state legitimacy, to starve it out of existence, the Christian "not-doing"
- Barth as German professor in the 1920s – Barth's so-called time 'out of politics'
- 1930s (*theological*) response to Nazism¹¹ – this was in stark contrast to numerous Lutheran receptions of National Socialism.¹²

⁷ Markus Mattmüller, *Leonhard Ragaz ind der religiöse Sozialismus. Die Entwicklung der religiöse Sozialismus. Die Entwicklung der Persönlichkeit und des Werkes bis ins Jahr 1913* (Basel and Stuttgart: Helbing und Lichtenhahn, 1957), 84f., cited in Jehle, 24.

⁸ Barth, letter to Eduard Thurneysen, 5th February, 1915, cited in Jehle, 28.

⁹ Cited in Jehle, 36f.

¹⁰ Cited in Jehle, 37.

¹¹ Already in 1925 Barth had taken a clear stand "against 'fascist nationalism' and its 'anti-Semitism'." [Cited in Jehle, 46]

¹² Paul Althaus (1888-1966) had in 1925 called democratic government a "disaster". "There needs to be a will responsible for the people as a whole which lies *beyond* the competition of interests and powers." [cited in Jehle, 39] Althaus spoke of the "ethical necessity" of princely service for the people and of princely decision." In his *Outline of Ethics* (1928), he asserted that from a Christian perspective one should

- 1933 *Theological Existence Today*,
- 1934 Barmen Theological Declaration¹³
- refuses to take the Hitler oath
- and is subsequently exiled from Germany
- 1938 writes to Czechoslovakia and Holland urging them to resist the Germans by armed force.¹⁴
- Barth declares that an enemy of the Jews “is, in principle, an enemy of Jesus Christ. Anti-Semitism is sin against the Holy Spirit.... And it is precisely in anti-Semitism that National Socialism lives and breathes.”¹⁵
- 1939, at the outbreak of war in Europe, Barth volunteered for Swiss military service in order to visibly emphasise his call to resistance. He was stationed at what would have been the frontline had the Germans invaded Switzerland, as the first line of defence until the Swiss regular army could gather. He sent to Bp. Bell of Chichester (19th June 1942) a picture of himself in military uniform with the remark: “resist the evil with *all* means.”¹⁶

In 1933 Barth famously declared that he intended “to do theology as if nothing had happened”. Emil Brunner complains that this is a move into making theology politically irresponsible, since theology can never operate secluded from what is happening. Has Barth here contradicted the pressure of his burgeoning critique of Nazism? Barth later suggestively replies

It is a legend without foundation that in 1933 I recommended a ‘passive unconcern’ to the German people when I urged that preaching should go on ‘as if nothing had happened’, i.e. in face of the so called revelation in Adolf Hitler. Had that advice been thoroughly pursued then, National Socialism would have come up against political opposition of the first order.¹⁷

In other words, Barth’s 1933 statements need to be carefully read in context. In this pamphlet of 1933, *Theologische Existenz Heute! (Theological Existence Today!)*, Barth was specifically pleading for the church to be true to its foundation in Jesus Christ, and to be obedient to him as its leader. This existence was being imperilled, Barth felt, by certain contemporary ecclesial alliances with the National Socialist State and its pattern of leadership, and these churches were thus listening “to the voice of a stranger”.¹⁸ In deliberate contrast to the rule of ‘German

insist upon a government that “has the courage to exercise authority and power.” The form of constitution should “make room for”, rather than exclude or paralyse, “a leadership [*Führertum*] which is free of majority will, responsible only to God, and capable of using authority.” Althaus in the 1930s asserted that Barth was actually demanding a “liberal constitutional state”, and consequently Barth did not fit into a Germany moulded by Lutheranism [cited in ‘Jehle, 39f.].

¹³ Jehle, 13: “This document not only provides a summary of Barth’s theology, but had and continues to have more influence upon the theological discussion of the entire ecumenical movement than any other document of the twentieth century.”

¹⁴ The church, “for the sake of the Gospel, must want a just state and therefore a just peace.” (24th Oct, 1938) [Cited in Jehle, 59] “For the sake of a just peace, the church may not deny the state the right to bear the sword.” If the state could “no longer protect peace in any other way”, then it had to “do so by the sword.”

¹⁵ Barth, 5th Dec 1938, cited in Jehle, 61.

¹⁶ Cited in Jehle, 69.

¹⁷ *Theological Existence Today*, cited in Gorringer, 21.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Theological Existence Today! A Plea for Theological Freedom*, trans. R. Birch Hoyle (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), 27.

Christians' that instructs the church to be "the Church of the German people,' that is to say 'of Christians of the Aryan race'", he declared that

If the German Evangelical Church excludes Jewish-Christians, or treats them as of a lower grade, she ceases to be a Christian Church.¹⁹

Given this, the statements cited derogatorily by Brunner (that theology must keep to its subject matter) pertain not to a necessary division of church and State in any Lutheran fashion, but rather to Barth's objections to the manner in which the *particular* relations between the German churches and *this particular government* were proceeding. When in 1938 Barth expressed that the state's power, belonging ultimately to God, is neutral as regards Truth in that it could go either way because of the non-neutrality of its members, he had already decided that the National Socialists were failing to fulfil the churches' proper function and the latter were going the 'demonic way'.²⁰ Instead, the church should preach the Gospel "in the Third Reich, but not *under* it, nor in its spirit", and the State should return to its proper function of granting the Gospel and the church a free course, a rather minimalist conception to which Barth later added that "The essence of the State is ... the establishment of justice (*Recht*)" through its power.²¹ By contrast, the fascist state, Barth declared, had lost its right to exist and thereafter "cannot be condoned by the Christian Fascism is pure *potentia*".²² That is why, despite his own reservations about the Swiss government, "to protect Switzerland from National Socialism" Barth felt it necessary "to join the army and guard a bridge over the River Rhine".

As a statement made in 1939 explains, "Wherever there is theological talk, it is always implicitly or explicitly political talk also."²³ Gorringer:

Not just in 1933, though critically then, Barth believed that a Church obedient to the Word *made a difference*.²⁴

- After WWII Barth controversially refused to sanction western demonisation of Communism.²⁵ A statement that incurred the wrath of many was a particular mistake in judgment about Stalin:

[O]ne cannot say about Communism what one had to say ten years ago about National Socialism, namely, that what it means and intends is pure stupidity, the monster of insanity and crime. It now really makes

¹⁹ Ibid., 49, 52.

²⁰ See Barth (1939), *Church and State*, trans. G. Ronald Howe, SCM Press, London, 15.

²¹ Barth (1969), *How I Changed My Mind*, ed. and trans. John Godsey, St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 164; Barth (1963), *Karl Barth's Table Talk*, ed. John D. Godsey, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London, 75.

²² Barth, 1963, 81.

²³ Cited in Eberhard Busch (1976), *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden, SCM Press, London, 240.

²⁴ Gorringer, ixf., 22.

²⁵ Gordon H. Clark fears that Barth's refusal to castigate the communist East for its atrocities is an "indifference to the post-World War II struggle", a "shutting his eyes to historical reality ... and denying the commandments of morality" [*Karl Barth's Theological Method*, 2nd edn. (The Trinity Foundation, 1997), 44]. This Clark contrasts with Barth's opposition to Hitler [52ff.]. Nymeyer complains that "Barth is 'soft' on communism. ... *Progressive Calvinism* does not consider Stalin to have been a 'man of stature' nor in any way better than Hitler. ... And Barth calls the most infamous butcher of all time a 'man of stature'! Our readers will begin to understand how strongly our values differ from those of Barth."

no sense at all to mention Marxism even for one moment in the same breath with the 'ideology' of the Third Reich, or a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin with such charlatans as Hitler, Göring, Hess, Goebels, Himmler, Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, Streicher, etc. What has been tackled in Soviet Russia – albeit with very dirty and bloody hands and in a way that rightly outrages us – is, after all, a constructive idea, the solution of a problem which is a serious and burning problem for us as well, and we with our clean hands have not yet tackled anything like it energetically enough, namely, the social problem ... as long as there is still a 'freedom' in the West to organize economic crises, a 'freedom' to dump our grin into the sea here, while people there are starving, so long as such things can happen, we Christians, at least, must refuse to hurl an absolute 'No' at the East.²⁶

Nevertheless, Barth was not here justifying Stalinism. Moreover, he did at least see in Marxism, at least in the beginning, an ambitious attempt to solve a real problem, whereas Nazism had no single good intention. Furthermore, as Jehle argues, "Barth was against *cheap* anti-Communism."²⁷ In a letter to a German theologian (17th Oct 1950) Barth writes:

Whoever does not [want] Communism – and we all do not want it – should certainly not wage war against it but much rather support serious Socialism! ... [With respect to Communism], in the end, there is basically only the positive defence ... which consists in creating just social conditions acceptable for all layers of the population.²⁸

Thus in May 1966 the aged Barth responded to a TV interviewer who asked why he had not confronted Communism with as such a clear 'no' as he had National Socialism, "that he did not live in a Communist country." The danger for the West "is certainly not Communism." Rather the danger is a certain "feeling of well-being" in which one passes through life and is endangered by forgetting the deeper dimensions of life. As for Barth himself, he "did not like to carry logs to a fire that was already burning. Who would not be against Communism?"²⁹

Daniel Migliore has a good sense of what Barth is doing here. He imagines how Barth might respond to Reinhold Niebuhr's charge of Barthian inconsistency in his treatment of Nazism and Communism:

As you should know by now, that 'silence' in relation to the invasion of Hungary was a careful and painful response to a particular and very complex situation that you and some other Western church leaders tried to oversimplify for your own propagandistic purposes. ... I did not then ... see Russia as the evil empire and the United States as the incarnation of goodness and innocence. In relation to the conflict between these two superpowers that developed after World War II, a different response from the church was and is needed in comparison with the one which I helped to mobilize against Hitler. The church

²⁶ Karl Barth, 'The Church Between East and West', *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946-1952*, trans. Stanley Goodman (London: SCM Press, 1954), 139f., Richard and Martha Burnett's translation, in Jehle, 88f.

²⁷ Jehle, 90.

²⁸ Cited in Jehle, 90.

²⁹ Cited in Jehle, 91.

needs to search for and promote a third option rather than allow itself to become the religious echo of one or other of these superpowers.³⁰

So Barth appeals for “neither an anti-communist peace nor a communist peace but the peace of God that surpasses all understanding – and therefore justice both against all and for all”.³¹

Barth’s Main Theologico-Political Concerns

The theology-in which I decisively tried to draw on the Bible was never a private matter for me, remote from the world and man. Its theme is God for the world, God for man, heaven for earth. This meant that all my theology always had a strong political side, explicit or implicit. You have mentioned my book on Romans. It came out in 1919 at the end of the first world war and it had a political effect even though there is not much about politics in it.³²

- God’s Freedom for Humanity

- *The Sovereignty of God and Political Non-conformism*

Barth credits his ‘turn’ from theological liberalism to a discovery of the dominating theme of the sovereignty of God, that ‘God is God’ and ‘man is man’. This came to be expressed in various ways, most notably in Barth’s use of the Kierkegaardian ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between God and world in the second edition of his commentary on *Romans*. God and the Kingdom of God is W/wholly O/other from world and society.

It is this that sets Barth against all forms of liberal immanentism, whether that be in theological affairs/systems, or political ideologies that find ways of identifying themselves with the divine.

One of Barth’s major points of disagreement with the liberal theological tradition concerned what he saw as its moralism, its all-too-easy identification of the Kingdom of God with the moral, socio-political or historical processes of bourgeois society. He feared that the social ethics of liberal Protestantism contained a dangerously immanentist teleology and theory of moral value, and as a result became an ethics from which judgement and the transcendent otherness of divine action had been scoured out. [Webster, 2000, 143]³³

³⁰ Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 289. Barth’s belief that democracy was the best system of government that had been envisioned is well-known. Jehle quotes the young Barth as having claimed with satisfaction that “the principle of equality if all citizens was well-known in the Swiss city-republics, like Basel and Zürich, long before the French Revolution.” [Jehle, 24]

³¹ Karl Barth, *Letters, 1961-1968*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 83, revised translation in Jehle, 98. Jehle, 103: “Barth was against an ideological anti-Communism and *at the same time* against a Christian glorification of Communism in the East. He fought in both directions against an absolutism and a theologization of political positions which were intrinsically secular.”

³² Karl Barth, ‘Music for a Guest -- a Radio Broadcast’, in *Final Testimonies*, reprinted www.religion-online.org/cgi-bin/researchd.dll?action=showitem&gotochapter=4&id=420.

³³ The first article of the Barmen declaration, with its stress on the exclusiveness of God’s revelation, resists the pseudoreligious claims of various political and civic ideologies.

It is just such a theological perspective that sets Barth up for ethico-politico non-conformism. As Jehle argues, "... Barth sought to honor the 'wholly Other,' he ... *had to be* uncomfortable and *could* not conform." [Jehle, 3]³⁴

- *Our 'No' must acknowledge its limits just as much as our 'Yes'*

The theme of the sovereignty of God in Barth's writings immediately following WWI seemed to suggest that the Christian option was, in Barth's words in *Der Römerbrief* of 1922, the 'Great Negative Possibility'. It seemed to several commentators that Barth's was a kind of theological negativity, and therefore a negative theological politics. The problem is that a negative theology operates with a similar local trajectory as a positive/natural theology – a movement from our negations to the divine Negation, i.e., a negative kind of analogy 'from below' but an analogy 'from below' nonetheless.

There are several suggestions in *Der Römerbrief*, and certainly later, that question such a negative possibility. Webster nicely delineates the theological sense of the problem:

Both naïvely unambiguous affirmation of action in the social realm and 'perfect criticism' are finite; and their lack of finality is rooted in the fact that God is other, capturable neither in a determinate pattern of social action nor in revolutionary overthrow of any such pattern. [Webster, 2000, 144]

It becomes clear as Barth turns his hand to reworking his dogmatics as a theological professor that his theological 'No' is grounded and bounded by and within his theological 'Yes'. So too with his theological politics – Barth's theological nonconformity is grounded and bounded as a purifying moment within his understanding of the political demands of the Gospel of God's being for the world in Jesus Christ.

Some political implications of Barth's theology of divine sovereignty (which was also expressed eschatologically through the *eschatological proviso*):

- Relativity of the state, even the 'best' state – all-too-human construction.
- The state may not therefore claim *absolute* allegiance – the state may not be "worshipped"
- The most important service the Christian can render to the state is prayerful nonconformism – Christians cannot ignore, escape, or avoid the demands of the state.³⁵

- God's Freedom for Humanity

- Divine command

His emphasis on transcendence, otherness, the 'higher order', is clearly not designed to exclude social action but to relativize it: to sever the bond which liberal moralists like Rothe established between positive affirmation of the social order and the Kingdom of God, and at the same time to sever the similar bond which the religious socialists established between social protest and the Kingdom. ... [T]he eschatological 'otherness' of God's action in Christ in fact liberates human action from the dehumanizing effect of having to be the bearer

³⁴ Notice the title given to the collection of Barth's immediate post-war collection of political essays: *Against the Stream*. Jehle picks this up with his own entitling of his work as *Ever Against the Stream*.

³⁵ Jehle, 107f.: "And whoever is praying for the state will spontaneously meet it not passively or indifferently. *To pray for someone or something means the most intensive participation possible.*"

of the Kingdom of God, taking from it its false absolutism, whether of 'Yes' or 'No' [Webster, 2000, 145].

- Human Autonomy as Obedience

The moral agent, or human being, is understood in the light of Jesus Christ. Hence, as Webster argues,

However much Barth argues that dogmatics is incomplete without ethics, and however much he is therefore to be considered a moral theologian, it is dogmatics which has the upper hand in his ethical writings. [Webster, 2000, 160]

- Human being as moral agent
- Responsible in being responsive
- Christologically conceived ethical 'correspondence' (a covenantal 'co-acting' that is founded on, constituted by, and regulated by God's prevenient command in Jesus Christ)

According ethical primacy to the 'name' of Jesus is therefore claiming that ethical reality – the moral world we inhabit, our own moral natures, above all, the God whose command we encounter – is defined at every point by Jesus Christ. Acting in God's stead and in our stead, Jesus establishes moral truth; good human action is action which corresponds to that truth. God's command is not merely that we should submit to a power, but that we should act in conformity with the reality of God's gracious history with us. [Webster, 2000, 155]

- Freedom for God and others, and freedom from that which hinders this. Barth writes against the autocracy of any mere cause. Humanity does not have to serve "causes", but causes have "to serve man."³⁶ Christians will always ask "what will happen to the people...?",³⁷ and will "see all persons as human beings and not as wearers of labels, not as mere figures and exponents of a 'cause'."

- God's Freedom for human wholeness

- Embodied 'souls'. Politics, of course, is the organisation of *public* life, the life of embodied people. In a lecture of 1911 in Safenwil, 'Jesus Christ and the Social Movement', Barth announces a theological principle that will remain with him throughout his subsequent theological life: in contrast to much of the Christian tradition Barth declares,

perhaps in no other area has Christianity fallen away as much from the spirit of its Lord and Master as it has precisely in its valuation of the relationship of spirit and matter, of inner and outer, of heaven and earth. It might be said that for 1800 years the Christian Church has, with respect to social problems, pointed continually to the Spirit, to the inner life, to heaven itself. It preached, converted, comforted, but it did *not help*. [Granted], it has at all times commended help toward the alleviation of social needs as a good work of Christian love, but it never

³⁶ Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 172.

³⁷ Barth, *Against the Stream*, 92f., Burnett trans. in Jehle, 93.

dared to say that the help itself was *the* good work. It never said: social needs *should not be*, and then, with *all* its strength, worked toward this *should not be*.... This is the great, mighty fall of the Christian Church, the falling away from Christ....

The entire picture of the relationship of spirit and matter, of heaven and earth, is completely different when we come to Jesus. For Him, there are not these two worlds, but only the one reality of the Kingdom of God. The opposite of God is not the earth, not matter, not the outer, but evil, or as he would say in the powerful way of that time, the demons, the devils which live within man. Therefore salvation does not lie in separating spirit and matter in order that man might 'enter heaven,' rather salvation means that God's Kingdom *comes to us* in matter and on earth. The Word became flesh (John 1:14) and not the other way around! ... God's Kingdom must rule over the outer, over real life.³⁸

Barth liked to quote the Swabian pietist, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger: "Corporeality is the end of the ways of God."³⁹

CD, III.2, 16: "in the language of the Bible the soul is simply the earthly life of man, and not at all a divine or heavenly component of his being."

- Two Kingdoms. Another version of a theological escape from political responsibility is the Lutheran 'Two Kingdoms' doctrine.⁴⁰ Barth, through his Reformed heritage, however, cannot allow for a separation of civil and Christian communities – "which means, if carried out onesidedly, [the] surrender of politics to its own laws and the banishment of every single Christian to his private conscience".⁴¹

Conclusion

Karl Barth's is a theological politics rather than a political theology – the governance of human affairs is to reflect and participate obediently in God's creative and life-giving governance of the world. That determines the way Barth presents himself:

- *Against the stream* – Barth's theological politics are often described in these terms. And it is true that he is strongly critical of the terms of human practices – Christian participation in politics can "never be uncritical participation." Hence Christians would not be "the easiest citizens to get along with, neither for government nor for a powerful majority or minority, neither for a clique nor for an individual personality."⁴² "Christian politics would always have to remain for the world a strange, obscure, and surprising matter", or else it would "certainly not be Christian politics.

However, a Christian *politics* (i.e., way of organising living together) it is, and *citizens* Christians are. In other words, Barth's 'strange' nonconformist politics involving negation (witnessing to God's 'No' in Jesus Christ) is always *set in the service* of something more positive, life-affirming, and creative (witnessing to God's 'Yes' Jesus Christ).

³⁸ Barth, 'Jesus Christ and the Social Movement', cited in Jehle, 32f.

³⁹ Cited in Jehle, 34f.

⁴⁰ However, for a different reading of Luther and Barth's relation to him here, see Jehle, 103ff.

⁴¹ Henz Eduard Tödt, cited in Jehle, 94.

⁴² *Against the Stream*, 82, revised trans. in Jehle, 99.

- *Theology of freedom* – Gorringer is absolutely right, I think, to speak of Barth's theology as a theology of liberation or freedom. William Werpehowski puts it like this:

the Christian community is liberated from all worldly systems of political thought and action in political engagements for and with needy, suffering humanity.⁴³

Jehle concludes his survey with the following claim which, while it certainly expresses the negative pole of what Barth was doing, certainly fails to get to grips with the positive theology of freedom as a participatory witness to the life-giving of the royal humanity of God in Jesus Christ:

‘A silent community, merely observing the events of the time, would not be a Christian community.’ This is the legacy of Karl Barth's political ethics.⁴⁴

Barth's legacy is not merely the general one that he refused to separate theological and political spheres, but rather the shape of a creative political agency that his profound and all-encompassing theological vision continually generates that must be appreciated first and foremost. It is in the service of this that the church refuses to perform any abstraction or reduction of God's grace in Jesus Christ to some self-contained and pure 'theological-spiritual' space (such a space also leaves the world graceless – and yet, Barth's theology forces one to face the possibility that the very space of the *secular* itself is not the absence of the theological anyway but in fact the presence of its form as enacted idolatry – hence the all-too-frequently expressed worship of the state in nationalism). That is why Barth can give (albeit provisional and qualified) *theological* support to the notion of a *social democracy*.⁴⁵ And it is because of this that critics like Reinhold Niebuhr and Langdon Gilkey exhibit their own failure to hear the political call of Barth's envisioned Gospel of Jesus Christ. Barth's theology does, in ad hoc and piecemeal fashion, endeavour to describe and redescribe the narratability of all that is, *all* that is. Anything less would be to miss the point of the God who in Christ has created all that is for God's Self, and in Christ leads all things back to their goal of (new) life, life in all its fullness, variety and complexity lived fully before and for God as God.

Gorringer:

From the very start there were those who thought that the lecture ['The Christian's Place in Society', 1919] undercut everything Christian

⁴³ William Werpehowski, 'Karl Barth and Politics', 241.

⁴⁴ Jehle, 108.

⁴⁵ Ronal Thiemann is right to argue that "In repudiating the *eternal* covenant, Barth does not thereby cut all ties between Christian theology and the intellectual and cultural resources of contemporary society. Gilkey and others are simply wrong when they claim that Barth 'presupposes a stark separation' between church and world, faith and secularity, theology and culture. Rather, Barth takes the relationships of those pairs to be endlessly fascinating and complex. No single systematic scheme could possibly encompass the variety of relations between theology and culture." [Thiemann, 81f.]

Socialism stood for. ... It is quite clear, however, that it represents no retreat into quietism, but rather a further radicalization, a deepening of the understanding of God's revolution. ... The message is: we cannot afford to be involved in side shows! The God who is the revolution beyond all revolutions is at work in all reality. Our task is to share in *this* movement. [Gorringe, 48f.]

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