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Karl Barth and Religious Language

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THE INTENSE CONCERN of many modern philosophers with the nature, meaning, and reference of language is compelling the theologian to look again with care at the words he uses and the speech he utters in relation to God and his self-disclosure to man. How can religious language ever justify itself and what qualifications must it meet to escape the philosopher's charge of untenable anthropomorphism? Many Christian thinkers no doubt feel that the meticulous analysis of sentences and language-units is a somewhat barren preparation for a study of a vital personal encounter between God and man. There would appear to be a great need to discuss language, not simply as language, but as that which emerges from a significant and meaningful "experience." Nor must we be scared of a word which in some theological circles today has been anathema because of its suggestions of subjectivity, psychologism, and wishful thinking.

We propose to consider in this article what Karl Barth has to say on this subject of religious language. Though it is often customary to dismiss the great Swiss theologian as one who has consistently scorned the alliance and support of philosophy, it is not true that he has had nothing to say on matters of great concern to the philosopher as well as to the theologian. In his *Church Dogmatics*, he has written extensively on the subject of religious language. What he has to say is of intense interest to all who concern themselves with these problems of language and meaning. If the Barthian position must finally be pronounced untenable, it will be of immense value to see precisely why it is so. In coming to grips with his handling of the problem, the way will inevitably be cleared for the seeking of a more adequate solution. It is important to realize that evangelical theology in its most distinguished modern representative has not been silent on a matter which evokes interest in circles far removed from normal theological pursuits. The philosopher himself can only benefit from seeing how his linguistic problems look from the point of view of one who is within "the faith." It is urgently required that philosophy and theology should resume intelligent and fruitful communication, even when there are grave and far-reaching differences of judgment. It is hoped that the following exposition of a point of view will further this kind of rapprochement.

From the point of view of our special interest, the most important part of Karl Barth's *Dogmatik* is Volume II, Part I, on the doctrine of God. Here, if anywhere, the author has given us a religious epistemology. Here he has grappled with the basic question "How can man *know* God?" or, as Barth

would no doubt prefer to put it, "How has God acted in such a way as to make himself knowable by man?" After what to many will seem a surprisingly sympathetic treatment of natural theology, he firmly and decisively "excludes natural theology from Church proclamation."¹ Whatever else natural theology may be, it cannot be a second source of the knowledge of God alongside of and possessing the same authority as that given in revelation. This presupposition must be kept firmly in mind as Barth's treatment of religious language is considered. Much that seems mysterious becomes understandable, even if not convincing, when the premise from which he starts is remembered.

We shall confine ourselves for the moment to a study of chapter v, §27, on "The Limits of the Knowledge of God." "God is known only by God. . . ."² This way of expressing the matter raises many problems at the outset. If God is known only by God, does not this in itself destroy the possibility of a genuine "I-Thou" relationship between God and man? If only God can know himself, then, strictly speaking, no one else can know him, not even partially and in a derived way. Yet Barth does not want to remain in a state of virtual agnosticism. God in his revelation, which is his knowability, makes it possible for man to know him. How can there be a truly personal relationship between God and man if one term of the equation is virtually eliminated? Is Barth, however, simply saying that man needs the help of the divine grace and presence if he is to make a response, or that no response could be made unless God had first revealed himself and therefore created the situation in which a human response was possible? If he is saying this, he is saying it in a peculiar way. If God is known only by God, how can man speak of him at all or apply any kind of analogy to him, personal or otherwise? Barth is quite frank in admitting that man *cannot* know God through the views and concepts with which in faith we attempt to respond. On the other hand, we have God's permission to do precisely this. If man can speak of God in human words, then this can only be if man already can view and conceive (i.e. perceive and think God).³ This latter possibility, however, is ruled out unless God has made himself known, and this means revelation. Now Barth appears to be contending here for the same point that we have been concerned to make. There must be some *kind of experience* of God prior to all human attempts to make it articulate in language. No doubt the term *experience* is carefully avoided because it stresses too much the human rather than the Godward side. Barth would prefer to speak of man's readiness to know God rather than his experience of God. Putting aside for the moment this verbal question, the fact remains that Barth affirms a human knowledge of God given to us in the revelation of the triune God. Though such knowledge is impossible apart from the

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. II, Part I: *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 176.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

revelation, when thus given, it does in fact become *human* knowledge. This knowledge, by virtue of its source, is given to us *in insurpassable and incontestable certainty*.⁴ It is at this point that we encounter a major difficulty. How do we know revelation in incontestable certainty? After all, this is not a relative but an *absolute* certainty. We cannot have this absolute certainty on the basis of any human cognition as such or as the result of any epistemological doctrine such as a philosopher might frame. Only God can establish us in this kind of certainty, but how does God do this? The question is further complicated by the fact that Barth rejects any extreme doctrine of verbal inspiration. Such absolute certainty is obviously not derived from the literal words of Scripture. Nor would he regard the institutional church as the infallible interpreter of the Scripture given into its keeping. That being so, the only way in which God can establish us in this absolute certainty is by some divine activity in our hearts and minds which gives us this certainty. Here appeal may be made to the classic Calvinistic principle of the *testimonium spiritus sancti internum*. Since, however, all appeal to reason in a broad sense has been rejected, are we not left with a purely esoteric and private individual conviction of certainty, the validity of which is not subject to any kind of rational judgment? Does not Barth appear to be saying, surprisingly enough, with the mystic: *I know because I know*? No doubt he would vehemently dissent. The mystic, he would say, thinks he can attain to God by an impulse, method, and technique derived entirely from human possibilities and capacities. He (Barth) is speaking of a knowledge given by God in absolute certainty. But how do I know it is God who thus gives it to me? Well, I know because I have this "insurpassable and uncontestable certainty." A point has been reached when no further argument or discussion is possible. If the Muslim thinks that Allah has spoken to him in absolute certainty through the Koran and his own experience, what can be said by the Christian in reply, except that our certainty is the genuine thing and his is not?

Obviously this discussion raises in an acute form the question of the kind of certainty which God intends us to have. One could use Barth's phrase "insurpassable and uncontestable certainty" about certain propositions in logic or mathematics. In this case, the certainty is such because the mind simply cannot think otherwise. It is evident, however, that religious certainty is not of this rigorous kind. It may very well be contended, as Professor H. H. Farmer does, for example, that there is a *coercive* element in our experience of God.⁵ An awareness of God, mediated through our grasp of absolute values, carries with it an element of compulsiveness, of inescapability. Indeed, the basic certainties of religion are of this compulsive and therefore incommunicable kind. Yet because we start from such, it does not mean that we stop there. This personal certainty must be placed in the widest context of knowledge and related to other kinds of certainty if it is to escape the

4. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

5. H. H. Farmer, *Towards Belief in God* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1942), pp. 39ff.

charge of personal fanaticism. Barth's position, despite his insistence on an objective supernatural revelation, is open to the same objections that can be levelled against the mystical claim that personal certainty is of itself an infallible guarantee of truth. These objections, however, cannot be met without some modification of his basic thesis concerning natural theology.

It is true that if men can speak of God in human words, then they must *know* him in some sense before they do this. Yet not only must they know him; they must also be so constituted that the human mind can think and speak truly of that which it knows. But, says Barth, our cognitive capacity as such cannot grasp God. We cannot even say that man has a capacity which revelation calls into activity and actualizes. Why not? One might have thought that the Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* could have been the foundation for such an argument. Why can we not say that human cognition is potentially capable of knowing God because God made men in his own image and fashioned him precisely for this end? This, however, is what Barth expressly excludes. We cannot speak of a human knowledge of God "in virtue of a potentiality of our cognition which has perhaps to be actualized by revelation."⁶ The only reason seems to be that such knowledge would detract from the *sola gratia* and *sola fide* by introducing a human element. It would leave open the door for a knowledge of God not mediated exclusively through Jesus Christ as the only absolute and unsurpassable revelation of God. "But we ourselves have no capacity for fellowship with God."⁷ This, indeed, is the crux of the matter. On what basis, biblical or otherwise, is it asserted that man has no such capacity? To assert such a human capacity does not necessarily make man sovereign over God. If man at all stages of his history has been related to the transcendent, and therefore to God, the idea of a human capacity totally unrelated to God's previous activity is, of course, a myth. No human knowledge of God is possible without God's willingness to make himself known. We might even echo here Barth's dictum that God is only known by God *in this sense*. It would appear that Barth's fear is not the claim to a human knowledge of God which is purely a human activity, because this would be self-contradictory. It is his dislike of the suggestion that God might reveal himself to man apart from Jesus Christ. Yet even on Barthian premises, it might well be argued that if God is as he has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ, then he would not have failed to respond to man's religious advances, even when these were made without the aid of the fuller illumination given by the incarnate Word. Professor A. C. Bouquet's impressive defence of this point of view in terms of the Logos philosophy provides a much needed corrective to Barth's one-sided statement of the case.⁸ The uniqueness and authority of the person of Jesus Christ are not undermined by the admission that men have a capacity for fellowship with God which God has actualized through the

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 182.

7. *Ibid.*

8. A. C. Bouquet, *The Christian Faith and Non-Christian Religions* (London: Nisbet, 1958), pp. 137ff.

activity of the unincarnate Logos. That such knowledge of God is impossible is shown, according to Barth, by the fact that "all knowledge implies some unity between knower and known. But between God and man there is no such unity."⁹ Presumably this claim is based on the Christian conviction that empirical man, man in his concrete decisions in history, is a sinner and alienated from God in rebellion and pride. No Christian at least would wish to deny this, but to forget that sinful man is still created in the image of God is to deny his humanity and make him incapable of any truly human response to the grace of God when this is shown forth in Christ. The denial of unity between God and sinful man cannot mean the denial that man is man in any sense at all. A creature in whom all moral and spiritual capacity has been totally annihilated would no longer be human and would therefore not be redeemable.

Again Barth asserts: "Between God and the creature in general, there consists an irrevocable *otherness*." Like the word unity, the word otherness contains a theologically dangerous ambiguity. If it means simply that man is not God, then the legitimacy of its use is granted. If, on the other hand, it means that there is no kinship whatsoever between man and God, then it must be repudiated as untrue to the biblical teaching about man. God, to cite Professor Farmer again, may be ontologically and axiologically *other* in the sense that he stands over against man in all the fullness of his being. He is the great objective "Person," for ever transcendent and distinct from his creature. The goodness and holiness, which are fully actualized in him, are never to be identified *tout court* with the partial human expression of absolute values in the decisions, ideals, loyalties of the finite creature. On the other hand, God cannot be said to be *wholly other* in the sense of absolutely without kinship with man his creature. If we say this, we have rendered both creation and redemption completely unintelligible.

How, then, can man know God and how can he speak of him? Barth admits that the knowledge of God based on revelation cannot be sharply distinguished from what we call knowledge in other connections.¹⁰ (This is a point to be remembered and to which we must return.) He goes a very long way indeed in admitting that our knowledge of God in revelation does not abolish God's hiddenness, and that human language as such is quite inadequate to its object, namely God. He is, however, very careful to distinguish between the biblical understanding of God's hiddenness and a philosophical doctrine of the limitation of human knowledge. The hiddenness of God in the biblical sense is something we know in faith, not a deduction from a theory of knowledge, such as the Kantian view of the limitations of the speculative reason. A negative or a positive epistemology about the capacity of human reason is still a matter of human knowledge or the lack of it. In the Bible, we are given a knowledge of God which is quite peculiar to the special manner in which a hidden God makes himself known to faith.

9. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 189.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

"God's hiddenness is not the content of a last word of human self-knowledge."¹¹ To say that God is hidden is not to say something about the limits of human knowledge in the philosophical sense. It is to say something which we have been taught by God in his revelation. From the point of view of human knowledge, God is *incomprehensible*.¹² "We cannot conceive God because we cannot even *contemplate* Him. He cannot be the object of one of those perceptions to which our concepts, our thought-forms and finally *our words and sentences* are related."¹³ Here Barth appears to be saying what the Kant of the first *Critique* said, what Feuerbach said in the early nineteenth century, and what the logical positivists are saying today. God is not an *object* in the usual sense of the word. He cannot be grasped by the senses, and therefore, cannot be described in our images and concepts. "No man hath *seen* God at any time" (Jn. 1:18). "All theology," said Feuerbach, "is anthropology,"¹⁴ a function of human activity and no more. Human thinking as such is quite incapable of knowing and apprehending God. But how far can we go along this path without being reduced to the complete silence which Augustine feared? What is the difference between Barth and those who hold an illusionist account of religion or who deny the meaningfulness of religious language because it refers to something which can never be verified in the sense-experience of men and the concepts built up on the basis of such experience? Barth insists: "The pictures in which we view God, the thoughts in which we think Him, the words with which we can define Him, are *in themselves* unfitted to this object and thus *inappropriate* to express and affirm the knowledge of Him."¹⁵ Even Professor Anthony Flew could hardly go further than this.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there must be some speech about God. Otherwise there would have been no Bible and there could be no church proclamation, no setting forth of the *kerygma* and no preaching. How, then, can we justify such speech? We ourselves have already emphasized that God is ineffable and that no human language is completely adequate to speak of him. Nevertheless, man cannot remain wholly inarticulate. All are agreed that some speech must be used. The question is: What kind of speech and how do we know that it gives us truth about God, even if the language is not a perfectly adequate vehicle of the truth?

The fact that God is invisible, ineffable, and incomprehensible, that he cannot be *defined* and therefore limited by human knowledge, does not mean, Barth asserts, "that theology and proclamation must be completely silenced."¹⁷ Nor does it mean that theology can only permit itself negative statements about God in the manner of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2d ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1881), Part I.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 188.

16. Cf. A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1955), pp. 170-86.

17. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 193.

If man can speak of God at all, he must restrict himself to the use of words, images, and concepts given in and with the revelation itself. That man has the divine permission to use this particular kind of language in no way affects what has been said about the inadequacy of all human language as such. Nor may we pick and choose among different kinds of language according to some philosophical norm not derived from revelation itself. For example, the assertion of some Hegelians that conceptual language is on a higher level than thinking employing concrete images is a proposition in no way final or binding upon the Christian use of language.¹⁸ Conceptual thinking, regarded in itself as an instrument for the "description" of God himself, is just as inadequate as "anthropomorphic" picture thinking. The only justification for human language about God is that it is given to us in revelation itself. Yet what kind of language may be used simply because the Bible uses it? Or are we justified in discriminating between different kinds of biblical language and, if so, on what grounds? "Even the language of ecclesiastical dogma and *that of the Bible itself* is not exempt from this crisis,"¹⁹ viz. the crisis which confronts all human language when faith in the presence of revelation acknowledges the hiddenness of God. Therefore, it is not simply a question of rediscovering and adopting the biblical language. This latter is not exempt from the previous assertion of the limitations of all human language as such. Even the words Father, Creator, Lord, Sovereign, and God itself are not "in themselves and as such *identical* with the ineffable name by which God calls Himself and which therefore expresses His truth."²⁰ In one man's mouth these words may truly mediate a knowledge of the hidden God. In another man's mouth they may only serve to conceal rather than reveal, and they thus become subject to the crisis of God's hiddenness. There is no way in which human language, even biblical language, can be infallibly guaranteed to mediate a knowledge of the hidden God who chooses to reveal himself. His freedom to reveal remains his and his alone.

Here again it would seem at first sight as if Barth is falling back upon a wordless mystical experience which cannot be made articulate or communicated directly to anyone else. This, however, is far from his intention. He is still *apprehensible* in his revelation, not directly, but indirectly, not to sight but to faith, not in his being, but *in sign*.²¹ The biblical language consists, therefore, of signs which God chooses to use to make himself known to faith. "Man is not left alone in himself, as the final presupposition of all mystical theology would make out."²² This negative judgment on mysticism is only valid if Barth's premise that genuine revelation comes only through Christ is accepted. If God has acted through the unincarnate Logos too, to use Dr. Bouquet's language, then some mysticism could not be accurately described in terms of man's being left alone in himself.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

20. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

19. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

To return to the question of language, however, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be inconceivable, as Barth insists, but in revelation man knows God and conceives him in his inconceivability and therefore is permitted to use the language signs which God himself has employed and consecrated with his own authority. God has given direction to men as to how they should use speech about himself. Having now apprehended God in his revelation, we are justified in attempting to respond to his revelation with human views, concepts, and language. If we ask again how we *know* that these concepts and linguistic signs apply to God in a not wholly misleading sense, Barth would appear to say: we do not know, if "knowing" involves a human epistemology grounded on some analogy between Creator and creature apart from revelation. It is only in faith and through the Holy Spirit that we can have any confidence at all that our speech is true speech about God. "Of ourselves we do not *resemble* God. We are not *master* of God. We are not one with God. We are not capable of conceiving Him."²³ Yet to claim some resemblance or kinship between man and God is not necessarily to deny the sinfulness of the creature or to claim to be supreme over God. It is only to affirm that when God created man in his image, he endowed him with capacities of thought and speech which make it possible for him to know and speak truly of God on the basis of analogies taken from human experience, and the nature of man's being as personal. Barth will not have it that the viewability and conceivability of God can be based on any analogy of being derived from man as such, though he admits that many of the fathers and later Christian thinkers have reasoned in this way.²⁴ Any analogies we use cannot derive from a revelation proceeding from the creation but from a "revelation entering into the creation and illuminating it."²⁵

If God is both Creator and Redeemer, however, why should we shrink from admitting a revelation through creation whereby man is given the possibility of thinking and speaking of God truly, even in spite of his sin? To ask this question is not to deny the necessity of redemption, but to affirm that all man's thinking and speaking about God is made possible by his original creation in the image of God. Even in his sin, man's personal existence, the gift of God, supplies the necessary basis for any analogies and any language about God, even his language about the God who reveals himself in Christ. The only way to avoid extravagant scepticism about the use of language in relation to God is the frank acceptance of a *natural theology* which is the presupposition of all meaningful language about God, even in the sphere of redemption. If all human language is ambiguous when applied to God except when supernaturally given by the Holy Spirit to faith, and even then the signs are "continually under the judgment of God and have no ability in themselves, not even as signs, to pass on the reality of God,"²⁶ we are left with a continuous sense of

23. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

25. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

uneasiness and uncertainty in regard to the very knowledge which, according to Barth, is given to us in incontestable certainty. Perhaps Barth feels that he has gone too far in this direction, for he warns us against an extreme scepticism about human language. "There is, therefore, no reason to suspect or depreciate the human image and human word about God as such."²⁷ To avoid such scepticism, however, Barth again falls back upon a simple appeal to authority. "But *who will attack and repudiate them* [i.e. human words] *in principle*, if and so far as their formation and expression derives from God's revelation?"²⁸ Now it is well known that Barth is not committed to any doctrine of verbal inspiration, though one sometimes wonders whether he has not given us a very subtle and highly sophisticated version of the same. He seems to be saying that biblical language is in some sense to be free from attack (rational criticism?) because it derives from divine revelation. On the other hand, all human language by its very nature must be accounted wholly inadequate for the job which the theologian asks it to do. There is here a curious mixture of the most extreme scepticism in regard to language with an uncritical acceptance of language when used by man in faith and in the realm of grace. Nevertheless, Barth goes on to say that we must never give up the labour of trying to find "better human views and concepts."²⁹ We must continue to distinguish between the true and the false. But how precisely do we distinguish? There is nothing in human cognition as such which could enable us to grasp the truth about God. There are no *criteria* except those given by divine grace to man's faith in the presence of revelation. But can we use these criteria to distinguish between the divinely given criteria? How can we discriminate between the more or less true in biblical language if the biblical language itself is the only criterion of truth? Or is all biblical language true as such? If so, we are back with verbal inspiration and all the insuperable problems connected with a consistent interpretation of Scripture on this basis.

Barth has really placed himself in an impossible position. He denies the adequacy of human images and concepts to express truth about God. Yet since revelation is given through human images, concepts, and language, it must be possible to think to some purpose where God is concerned. Unless there is a refusal to face the difficult question of discriminating, even in the Bible, between error and imperfection and the "core" of truth, the appeal to revelation in itself does not solve the problem. Barth is right, of course, to remind us that our speech about God can never be definitive or totally adequate to its object, God. The revelation is authentic because God is his own witness and teacher. But does God's making known the truth about himself in revelation differ *toto coelo* from the manner in which he makes truth known to man in other ways? Are the criteria of truth given to faith quite different from the criteria of truth given in man's apprehension, not mediated directly through Christ, of moral and spiritual realities? To

27. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

29. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

say that they are is once again to fall back upon some conception of authority to be unquestioningly accepted. Yet this makes Christian truth esoteric in the sense of being *the possession of those only who have faith*. This notion is true in one sense, but not in the sense that the Christian criteria of truth are quite different from those of which the "natural man" is aware. If Christian thinkers appeal to the authority of faith only, and differ among themselves in the interpretation of such divine truth, an impasse has been reached. The only way out would seem to be an infallible interpreter, whether Bible, church, or some incommunicable mystical experience, which appeals to its own sense of complete psychological certainty.