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Karl Barth's Attitude to War in the Context of World War II

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Introduction

Karl Barth (1886-1968) always followed with great interest and excitement matters concerning war. Before he was sixteen years old he 'lived and dreamed of military exploits'.¹ He used to play war-games with his brothers using 'lead soldiers for hours on end and did so with great seriousness'.² He read many historical books on past wars; and the one which made the greatest impression on him was Christian Niemeyer's book *A Book of Heroes. A Memorial of the Great Deeds in the Wars of Liberation*. He was so influenced by this book that when as a first-grader in school he was asked to construct a sentence for grammatical analysis, Barth's contribution clearly reflected his fascination with the theme; (1) 'Napoleon founded the Confederation of the Rhine'. (2) 'Wellington and Blücher beat Napoleon at Waterloo'.³ Also as a youth he joined the cadet corps.

The first World War had a significant effect on Barth's life and also on the shaping of his theology. He was greatly disappointed with the support which his former venerated liberal theological teachers gave to the war policies. He could only describe their adoption of this position as a 'double madness' and the occasion of their declaration in support of the Kaiser's war policy as a

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth. His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*. (London: SCM 1976), 16.

² *Ibid.* 16. See also Markus Barth, 'Current discussion on the Political Character of Karl Barth's Theology', in *Footnotes to a Theology, Karl Barth colloquium of 1972*. Edited by Martin Rumscheidt (The Corporation for the Publication of Academic studies in Religion in Canada, 1974), 77.

³ E. Busch, *op. cit.*, 16; Markus Barth, *op. cit.*, 77.

'black day'. His teachers had hopelessly compromised with the 'ideology of war' by directly supporting German nationalist aims. The support meant that the morality, politics and ethics both of his respected professors and of the European Socialist movements had failed. Such an awareness led him to a diligent and laborious search for a new theological content and framework.

World War II also had an immense effect on his socio-political thinking. It compelled him to define more accurately and without compromise the trinitarian and incarnational ground of his resistance to the Nazi regime, as we shall see in a moment.

Six years before his death, Barth still showed considerable interest in military matters. When he visited the United States in 1962, he surprised his guides with his detailed knowledge of the American civil wars. While staying in the U.S.A. not only did he visit the civil war battle field, but he also fired a Confederate rifle. His second shot did not fail to hit the target which was a coca-cola bottle!

It would be utterly wrong however to see Karl Barth as a man or a theologian of war in the light of what we have just said. The analysis of what he had to say on war in C/D III/4 and other material shows that he was a man of peace who strove for peace. This profound concern for peace led him to work hard for its realisation both during and after the war.

I shall be primarily concerned in this paper with Barth's treatment of war in the *Church Dogmatics III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*. I will try to show how his presentation of war in the Dogmatics reflects his own participation in World War II. My approach will be largely descriptive as space does not allow for too detailed a discussion of the variety of issues raised.

My paper is divided into three main sections. The first section will deal with the theological basis of Barth's reaction to war. The second will examine his treatment of war in C/D III/4; and the third section will deal with some issues arising from his concept of the extreme case and its relevance for the contemporary debate on war.

1. Incarnational Christology as the Basis of Barth's Involvement in the War

It is a well attested fact that Karl Barth did not do his theology in an ivory tower secluded from the world but within a society or State that was passing through one of the stormiest periods in history. Not only did he speak to the socio-political problems and concerns of the time, but he was actively involved in them. His

participation in World War II was determined by his theological stance. Barth's own remark towards the end of his career is evidence of this: 'I decided for theology because I felt a need to find a better basis for my social action.'³ In the light of this, it will be appropriate to begin our study by looking at the theological basis of Barth's attitudes to War as portrayed in the *Church Dogmatics* and through his own involvement in the war.

Barth's discussion of the problem of War comes under the general heading of 'Freedom for Life', in C/D III/4. The key word in this vast section which covers 240 pages is *LIFE*.⁴ It appears in each of the three subtitles: (1) Respect for Life; (2) The Protection of *Life*; and (3) The Active *Life*. This is an indication of the great value which Barth places on human life. Under the term 'Respect for Life' or 'Reverence For Life', a slogan which Barth borrows from Albert Schweitzer, Barth stresses the important point that human life is a loan which God has given to men. Because of this man must treat life with respect. Writing on 'The Protection of Life', where he discusses abortion, euthanasia, suicide, capital punishment and war, Barth begins by grounding this respect and concern for the preservation of life in the incarnation. He emphasises that in the incarnation God has given life a particular distinction.⁵ 'The birth of Jesus Christ as such is the revelation of the command as that of respect for life'. This gives life 'even in the most doubtful form the character of something singular, unique, unrepeatable and irreplaceable'.⁶ In the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, God has affirmed human life and therefore commands us to protect it against each and every callous negation and distortion.

To this affirmation of human life on the grounds of the incarnation, Barth offers an exception. He points out that 'the protection of life required of us is not unlimited nor absolute'. 'Human life has no absolute greatness or supreme value'. What Barth means is that life is not a kind of second god. It is limited and defined by the trinitarian God who is the supreme good and Lord of life.⁷ There are extreme cases when the trinitarian and the incarnate God may command us to surrender and sacrifice life for the protection and preservation of life. As Barth explains, the exceptional case 'cannot be completely excluded, since we cannot deny the possibility that God as the Lord of life may further its

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (C/D) III/4, 324–564.

⁵ C/D III/4, 338ff. See also G. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 166.

⁶ *Ibid.* 339.

⁷ *Ibid.* 398.

protection even in the strange form of its conclusion and termination rather than its preservation and advancement. Yet this exceptional case can and should be envisaged and accepted only as such, only as *ultima ratio*, only as highly exceptional, and therefore only with the greatest reserve on the exhaustion of all other possibilities'.⁸

It is indeed a matter of surprise, Barth comments, that, after the incarnation in which human life was assumed and lived by God himself in Jesus Christ, after the crucifixion where God's incarnate Son assumed and absorbed all human death, and after the resurrection where the power of death was defeated by the power of the Spirit, the New Testament does not simply declare all killing to be out of the question.⁹ What the New Testament demonstrates quite clearly is that, though the event of the incarnation has pushed the exceptional case of legitimate killing much further back than in the traditions recorded in the Old Testament, it still has not been eliminated altogether. There is still the possibility of God commanding man to lay down his life for the protection and preservation of life.¹⁰

Barth's concern to ground his discussion of 'The Protection of Life' in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ provides the key to understanding his attitude to war in respect not only of the precise character of his views but also of his method of approaching the subject. Both the content and the methodology are derived from his understanding of Jesus Christ. It was his deep concern to witness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ which formed the basis of his political and militarist resistance to Hitler. The centrality which he accorded to Jesus Christ runs through all the writings and speeches which he gave from 30 January, 1933 (when Adolf Hitler and his National Socialists forced their way to power in Berlin,) till the end of the War and beyond. A few instances may suffice to explain the point we are making. As E. Busch reminds us, in the first days of the Third Reich Barth gave a lecture on the theme: 'The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom'. In this lecture he warned against the danger of having 'other gods' than God in every theological attempt to connect 'the concept of revelation with other authorities which for some reason are thought to be important' (like human 'existence', 'order', 'state', 'people', and so on). The Church was then challenged to say farewell 'to all and every kind of natural

⁸ Ibid. 398.

⁹ Ibid. 400; see also John H. Yoder, *Karl Barth and the Problem of War* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 29.

¹⁰ Ibid. 400.

theology, and to dare to trust only in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ'.¹¹ In June 1933, at a working group on the 'Fourteen Düsseldorf Theses', Barth emphasised his christological stance in the War: 'The holy Christian Church, whose sole head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, keeps to it and does not hearken to the voice of a stranger'.¹² Again in the Barmen Declaration (Confession) Barth and the Confessing church, in May 1934, affirmed the centrality of Jesus Christ in their struggle against the Nazis. Barth writes later: 'What we wanted in Barmen was to *gather together* the scattered Christian spirits (Lutheran, Reformed, United, Positive, Liberal, Pietistic). The aim was neither unification nor uniformity, but consolidation for united attacks and therefore for a united march. No differences in history or tradition were to be glossed over, but we were kept together by 'the Confession of the one Lord of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church'. This was the one and only centre around which we were gathered together at that time, . . . the one *Lord* of the Church, Jesus Christ'. 'This was the point at which we had learned from the confessions of the century of the Reformation, and needed to speak more explicitly and more precisely than they did. At that time we were asked too explicitly and too precisely not only *what* but *who* was the real ruler of the world and of the Church. We were asked whom we would hear, whom we would trust and whom we would obey. It is a remarkable and indeed indisputable fact that the Synod of Barmen showed its unanimity and resolve on this very point'.¹³ In his other war-time writings such as the *Credo* which was dedicated to his fellow ministers 'who stood, stand and will stand' in the fights against the quasi religious ideology of 'blood and soil', Barth emphasised the Lordship of Jesus Christ over against other 'lords'. Again in 'Gospel and Law' (*Evangelium und Gesetz*),¹⁴ a speech which the Gestapo prevented him from delivering, but was read in his name after he had been dismissed from Bonn in 1935, Barth insisted that both the Gospel and Law are based in the grace of God, in the Lord Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary. Again in his paper 'Justification and Justice'¹⁵ (*Rechtfertigung und Recht*) delivered

¹¹ E. Busch, 224.

¹² *Ibid.* 225.

¹³ *Ibid.* 247; see also Douglas S. Bax, 'The Barmen Theological Declaration. A New Translation', in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (June 1984, No. 47), 78–81.

¹⁴ Karl Barth, 'Gospel and Law' in *Community, State and Church*, with introduction by Will Herberg. (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1968), 71–100.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht* (English translation, Church and State), in *Community, State and Church*, 101–148.

in 1938 Barth consistently emphasised the centrality of Jesus Christ for both Church and State. In 'A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland',¹⁶ Barth reiterated that the primary and ultimate reason for the Church's involvement in the war must be christologically grounded. He cautioned that Christian attitudes to the war could not be based on 'Western civilization', 'the liberty of the individual', 'freedom of knowledge', 'the infinite value of the human personality', 'the brotherhood of men', 'social justice', etc.¹⁷ To be sure, these conceptions have positive meaning for us as Christians, but they should not be the main reasons for the Church to wage war against the National Socialist dictatorship. What constitutes the Church's foundation is Jesus Christ, and therefore any decision which the Church may reach with regard to her attitude to war must be derived from *this* centre alone! '... I would that you, my dear Christian brethren in Great Britain, should understand it: our resistance to Hitler will be built on a really sure foundation only when we resist him unequivocally in the name of peculiarly Christian truth, unequivocally in the name of Jesus Christ'.¹⁸ In short Barth consistently and persistently allowed the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ to shine through all his writings and speeches during the war. It is therefore not surprising that when he later comes to deal with the question of war and other forms of killing such as abortion, euthanasia, self-defence and Capital-punishment in the *Church Dogmatics* III/4, he begins his discussion with the incarnation. And his methodology of first affirming that the value of life can still be commanded by God, is derived from his understanding of the incarnation.

To appreciate Barth's attitude to war it will be appropriate to try and understand what he means by the extreme limits or exceptional cases. John H. Yoder has made a classic contribution in this direction. The German word which Barth uses to describe the exceptional cases is *Grenzfall*. It means literally, 'borderline case', or 'limiting case', or 'extreme case'. As Yoder explains:

The *Grenzfall* does not mean that there must be an exception to every affirmation; nor does it mean to affirm in advance that, in a given case where certain conditions are met, the taking of life would be right. Such an interpretation would be a reversion to casuistry, which is precisely what Barth wants to avoid... To understand the *Grenzfall* we must remember that bodily life, as one of the

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *A Letter To Great Britain from Switzerland* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1941), 1-29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 17

dimensions of human creatureliness, is good because it is the presupposition, the vehicle, so to speak, of obedience to God; but the 'good' of life is for this reason not an absolute; it is not an autonomous value. 'Not autonomous' means *limited (begrenzt)*. The limit is God's purpose for life. The true measure of the goodness of life is obedience to the command of God. God is himself free to command as he wills; other-wise he would no longer be sovereign.¹⁹

By the use of the term *Grenzfall* Barth wants to affirm three fundamental issues in his treatment of the question of war, namely, the sovereignty of God, the responsibility of man and the finitude of all human values. (1). To say that God is he who has loved us and continues to love us in freedom through his incarnate, crucified and resurrected Son, Jesus Christ means that God is totally free to speak and act again 'across the frontier which limits our human knowledge of his will'.²⁰ Although God has commanded 'Thou shalt not kill', yet as the Lord and Creator of life he is free and right in some cases to command man to act in a way which may appear contradictory to his command. In other words, there can be no valid generalisation on man's side which limits God's freedom and sovereignty. (2). Secondly, the extreme case or the borderline case is a sign and safeguard of human responsibility and freedom.²¹ Barth maintains that in Jesus Christ God calls all men and women to be more authentically and fully human beings. An aspect of this human freedom and responsibility is the ability to decide in the midst of the situation what the will of God is for us. It is not a decision which we take ahead of time. Each concrete situation demands fresh decision and obedience. To make the Commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' an answer for every situation ahead of time means that men and women are not in reality free to bear the full responsibility of the decision of the moment. Thirdly, the exceptional case means there is a limit to all our values as human beings. Life is valuable but it is not absolute. It is limited by God who is himself the Lord of life.²²

2. Barth's Treatment of War in C/D III/4

Barth's discussion of the question of war begins with an important reminder that unlike the question of private duels which is no longer an issue for the Church, war continues to pose

¹⁹ John Yoder, op. cit., 35.

²⁰ Ibid. 66.

²¹ Ibid. 68.

²² Ibid. 68.

a serious problem for Christian ethics today. Since 1795 there have been several protests against war in Europe but with very little effect. Notably, in 1938 after the Peace of Munich the slogan was: 'Peace in our time': and yet after this consoling cry, war continues to rage more violently than ever. The truth is that the problem of war is by no means exhausted by our slogans and cries. More than ever the question of war claims our attention.

Critique of the Traditional View on War

Having stated the relevance of the problem of war for today, Barth offers three limitations to the traditional views on war. The first critique is that it is no longer possible to accept the view that war involves only the soldiers or the military classes. War involves the entire human population and therefore every individual participates in it, directly or indirectly. Each individual shares in the suffering and action which war brings to human-kind. Therefore, it is not the responsibility of the military classes and the experts alone to ask seriously whether war can be justified. 'This is the first thing which today', says Barth, 'makes the problem of war so serious from the ethical standpoint. It is an illusion to think that there can be an uncommitted spectator.'²³ The second critique is that in the past war was presented as possessing 'some sort of mystical halo or flavour of chivalry', it was viewed as a matter of ideals and moral values. This way of presenting war obscured one of the major reasons for waging war, i.e., the acquisition and protection of material interests. In our time, this strong desire to acquire economic power can no longer be obscured. War is now mainly a matter of selfish economic interest. Barth expresses it succinctly:

We have no good reason not to recognize that modern war, especially between great nations and national groups is primarily and basically a struggle for coal, potash, ore, oil and rubber, for markets and communications, for more stable frontiers and spheres of influence as bases from which to deploy power for the acquisition of more power, more particularly of an economic power. To those who have eyes to see, it is especially evident today that there exists a world-wide armaments industry which has many ramifications, which is initiated and spurred on by modern technical science, which is always forging ahead on its own account, which is closely linked with many other branches of industry, technical science and commerce, and which imperiously demands that war should break

²³ C/D III/4, 451.

out from time to time to use up existing stocks and create the demand for new ones.²⁴

When economic power, coupled with political mysticism possess and enslave men and women, then war become inevitable.²⁵ In other words, war is a symptom of our inability to control and organise our economic needs justly in peacetime. 'This is the unvarnished truth from which we can no longer escape so easily today as previously.'²⁶ Thirdly, in the past it used to be argued that the main intention in war was to neutralize the resistance of the enemy. The argument was unrealistic at that period of human history, and is much more unacceptable today. In our time, we cannot pretend that the goal of neutralizing the forces of the enemy does not involve the mass killing of both the military and civilian population. It is put quite simply and powerfully in these words:

Today, however, the increasing scientific objectivity of military killing, the development, appalling effectiveness and dreadful nature of the methods, instruments and machines employed, and the extension of the conflict to the civilian population, have made it quite clear that war does in fact mean no more and no less than killing, with neither glory, dignity nor chivalry, with neither restraint nor consideration in any respect.²⁷

Barth's critique of the justification of war by much traditional theology compels and summons us today to face 'the reality of war without any optimistic illusions'.²⁸

Barth makes it absolutely clear that if ever it become necessary to consider 'any question of just war' as a divine command it can only be undertaken and participated in 'with even stricter reserve and caution', than have been found to be necessary in relation to such killings as suicide, abortion, capital punishment etc.'.²⁹ He does allow, however, for certain extreme cases when war may be approved and commanded by God.

Barth goes further to give three reasons why war is much more serious than abortion, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment etc. First, in war, all the members of a nation are directly and indirectly involved in the preparation and promotion of killing and being killed. Everyone in the state is directly responsible for

²⁴ *Ibid.* 452.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 452.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 452.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 453.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 453.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 454.

mass-killing or mass-murder. The second reason for seeing war as more serious than any other form of killing is that the 'enemy' across the border is acting under the same persuasion as the one on the opposite side of the border. Both are engaged in the destruction of human life under the conviction that they are serving their respective nations. Each man, like the soldier on the other side of the border, is fighting to kill or murder with the approval of his nation-state. The danger here is that the nation-state is granted an absolute status to kill and be killed. The third reason for seeing war as more serious than other forms of killing is that it calls in question the whole of morality. In fact the command of God in all its dimensions is undervalued when war is waged. Barth puts this in a form of questions.

Does not war demand that almost everything that God has forbidden be done on a broad front? To kill effectively, and in connexion therewith, must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander, and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience?³⁰

In short, war does not make men better, rather it involves them in all sorts of temptations and sins. It follows from these three reasons given above that Christian ethics cannot accept war as part of the Gospel message.

This radical position of Barth is unique in the history of mainstream European Protestant theology. As John H. Yoder rightly remarks:

To say that war is worse than other kinds of killing already means a revolution in theological ethics. Protestants and Catholic alike have taught for centuries that abortion and suicide are far more serious kinds of killing than is warfare. In reversing the order of importance of these various kinds of disobedience to the order of God, Barth has already made a tremendous step toward a wholly new apprehension of the problem.³¹

In this respect Barth maintains that 'pacifism has almost infinite arguments in its favour and is almost overpoweringly strong'.³² Thus, pacifism does more justice to the Gospel than any other *general* ethical evaluation of war. Going back to some of the early Church Fathers, like Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and Lactantius, Barth affirms that '*the militia Christi* is incompatible with active participation in carnal warfare'.³³ The traditional Catholic and

³⁰ Ibid. 454.

³¹ John Yoder, *op. cit.*, 38-39.

³² C/D III/4, 455.

³³ Ibid. 455.

Protestant argument which sought to justify war on the basis that it is the essence and function of the state or the powers that be, is 'increasingly unbearable perversion of Christian truth'.³⁴ The Church must be horrified by war and should not integrate it 'quite smoothly into the system of political life recognized by it, and then into its own Christian system'.³⁵

War should not under any circumstances be considered as a normal part of the Christian understanding of what constitutes the ontology and activity of 'the just state or the political order demanded by God'.³⁶ Only in an infinitely extreme case can the Christian ever conceive of war as a divine command. 'Christian ethics cannot insist too loudly that such mass slaughter might well be mass murder, and therefore that this final possibility should not be seized like any other, but only at the very last hour in the darkest of days'.³⁷ The Church and theology must not give the state or the political system *carte blanche* to grasp the *ultima ratio* for mass-killing or murder. If the Church accepts war as part of the state's essence and function, and thus as a matter of habit consents to the use of violence, it will not be able to recognise the darkest hour when it is expected to give an authentic and authoritative call to the state to wage war.

Barth has put his finger on an important issue. He has detected the error which influenced the Church to support the war policies of the First and Second World Wars. The nineteenth-century idea that 'the true essentials of universal and national history' are a series of battles and conflicts waged on sea and land became absorbed into the Church's theology and ethics.³⁸

What the Church must continue to insist is that the true essence and function of the nation-state is to maintain and safeguard human life and peace.

The state which Christian ethics can and must affirm, which it has to proclaim as the political order willed and established by God, is not by itself and as such the mythological beast of the jungle, the monster with the Janus head, which by its very nature is prepared at any moment to turn thousands into killers and thousands more into killed . . . According to the Christian understanding, it is no part of the normal task of the state to wage war; its normal task is to fashion peace in such a way that life is served and war kept at bay.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid. 455.

³⁵ Ibid. 456.

³⁶ Ibid. 456.

³⁷ Ibid. 456.

³⁸ Ibid. 458.

³⁹ Ibid. 458.

The state's primal function is to devote all its powers and ability into keeping the peace. The Church cannot agree with the position of the absolute pacifist who maintains that disarmament is the state's primal concern. Neither can it support the view of the militarist that rearmament is the first concern of the Church. The concern of both militarist and absolute pacifist must take second place. In short, 'neither rearmament nor disarmament can be a first concern, but the restoration of an order of life which is meaningful and just'.⁴⁰ Only when the Church has made it absolutely clear to the state that: (a). Christians are concerned with 'the fashioning of true peace among nations to keep war at bay'; and (b). Christians are concerned to seek peaceful measures and solutions among states to avert war, can the Church go on to affirm that Christian participation in war is not absolutely beyond all possibility.

An extreme possibility may arise when the survival of a weaker nation—its entire people, their physical, spiritual and intellectual prosperity, including their relationship to God, is threatened and attacked by brutal aggression. In this extreme case an allied nation or group of nations may offer assistance to the 'weaker neighbour'.

The possibility of an exceptional case indicates that for Barth absolute pacifism cannot always represent a Christian stance on war. A further point is that if war itself cannot be eliminated absolutely as a matter of principle from Christian ethics, neither can preparation for national defence be eliminated.⁴¹ A distinctively Christian note to which Barth draws attention in this regard is that the Command to defend the existence of a nation within its own borders is not conditioned by the success or failure of the enterprise. The only criteria are faith and obedience 'in this hard and terrible business' of national defence.⁴²

Individual Responsibility

What we have said so far concerns the state. Since the state is made up of individuals, Barth addresses the individual in the state in the last section of the sub-title, 'The Protection of Life'. Correcting the infamous statement of Louis XIV, Barth states that, 'Every individual in his own place and function is the state. If the state is a divine order for the continued existence of which

⁴⁰ Ibid. 458.

⁴¹ John Yoder, *op. cit.*, 41.

⁴² Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme, 1938–1945* (Zollikon-Zurich: Ev. Verlag, 1945), 279; see also III/4, 463; John Yoder, *op. cit.*, 41.

Christians should pray, we can also say that, as they themselves are the Church, so they are also the state'. Each individual, not as a private person, but as a citizen must understand that the same message addressed to the state applies to him. He must understand that war is a terrible reality; and that it is his responsibility to work for a just peace. He must ask himself seriously 'whether in his own conduct and general behaviour, his way of thinking and speaking, what he permits or forbids himself to do, what he supports or hinders in others'⁴³ postpones or prevents war. In short, the Church must ask each individual: Do you see the horror of war? Have you worked for peace?

Like the state, it is only when every individual has faced the question of peace and the preservation of peace, that he can be asked whether he is 'willing and ready *ultima ratione, in extremis*, to accept war and military service. Barth maintains that even in relation to the exceptional case, each individual citizen 'must decide from case to case whether' he should be a conscientious objector. In other words conscientious objection must not be a rigid principle. It is the duty of the Church to help individuals to come to some form of decision. Once a decision has been reached after hard and honest searching and questioning, he must act 'as a revolutionary, prepared to pay the price of his action, content to know that he has on his side both God and the better informed state of the future, hoping to bear an effective witness to it today, but ready at least to suffer what *rebus sic stantibus* his insubordination must now entail'.⁴⁴ Barth quite rightly places D. Bonhoeffer and other serious minded German Christians who decided and attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler, among those who acted responsibly as individuals during the war.⁴⁵

3. Varied and Opposing Interpretations of Barth's Notion of the Exceptional Case

Barth's idea of an exceptional case (*Grenzfall*) has been construed in varied and conflicting ways. As a result he has been claimed to support opposing Christian views on war. We shall consider three such interpretations.

⁴³ III/4, 465.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 468.

⁴⁵ Karl Barth, *Against the Stream*, 151: III/4, 449: see also R. Aboagye-Mensah, 'The Socio-Political Thinking of Karl Barth', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1984, 240.

1. Karl Barth, a Pacifist or Militarist?

There are pacifists like John Yoder who state emphatically that Karl Barth was a pacifist and therefore his concept of the exceptional case must be understood within the context of pacifism. Yoder writes:

The degree to which Barth has understood and in fact agreed with pacifism demonstrates that he is misunderstood when he is interpreted to confirm the traditional rejection of pacifism by Christian theologians. Karl Barth is far nearer to Christian pacifism than he is to any kind of systematic apology for Christian participation in war. For him it is theologically not possible to construct a justification of war. There is no Christian argument for participating in war. There is only the possibility of 'limiting cases' whose sole ground is God's sovereign (and exceptional) command to man.

The discussion with Barth is therefore not a debate between pacifism and militarism, nor even between pacifism and non-pacifism. It is rather a debate to be carried on within the pacifist camp, between one position which is pacifist in all the general statements it can make but announces in advance that it is willing to make major exceptions, and another position, nearly the same in theory, which is not able to affirm in advance the possibility of the exceptional case.⁴⁶

It is true that Karl Barth had a great sympathy for the pacifist negation of war. In fact ninety-nine per cent of what he said in C/D III/4 on war strengthens the pacifist position as John Yoder has rightly pointed out. However, Yoder's interpretation of Barth's concept of the extreme case is misleading. It raises serious problems when seen against the background of Barth's own resistance during the war. Barth's call for 'unconditional resistance' to Adolf Hitler on theological, ideological and military lines, makes it difficult to place him within the pacifist camp. He made it clear that 'in this particular war' the Christian Churches could not take 'a neutral and pacifist' position. 'The pacifist argument' was seen to be 'unrealistic'.⁴⁷ Indeed Barth was bold enough to say that armed struggle against Hitler's Germany was the 'clear will of God' and therefore Christians had to 'combat it with all' their strength. 'The obedience of the Christian to the clear will of God compels him to support this war,'⁴⁸ he advised Christians in Great Britain. In the Barmen Confession, the Christians' struggle was to be understood as a witness 'in the midst of the sinful

⁴⁶ John Yoder, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Karl Barth, *A Letter to Great Britain . . .* 5; cf. E. Busch, *op. cit.*, 33.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 9.

world'. The resistance was a 'joyful liberation from the godless' activity of the National Socialist nihilism.⁴⁹

Barth did not just tell other Christians what they should do. In fact, he himself was actively involved in the war in at least two ways. He exhorted Christians to continue steadfastly in their armed struggle against Hitler through 'open letters', most notable of which were his letters to Great Britain and France. Apart from these letters, he also served voluntarily for 104 days at the age of 54 years, as a Swiss army auxiliary. His activity involved guarding bridges and public utility buildings against possible German invasion.

In the light of Barth's theological, military and ideological justification of World War II and his own personal military involvement, it would be unrealistic to call him a pacifist. It is true that in the C/D he argues that 'war must be excluded', but he also maintains that his position 'is not pacifism'.⁵⁰ On the other hand, Barth insists that to use his concept of the exceptional case as a justification for war is a 'sheer wickedness'.⁵¹ In other words, he is not a militarist. What is he then? It seems to be that his stance must be understood as embodying a dialectical tension between the absolute pacifist position and that of the absolute militarist.

2. Nuclear Rearmament and Nuclear Warfare

The second issue raised by Barth's concept of the extreme case is the question of nuclear warfare. After World War II there was a debate on whether or not the German Federal Government was to be rearmed with nuclear weapons. Those who supported the nuclear rearmament of Germany justified their position by appealing to Barth's statement that he defended Switzerland against Hitler because 'the independence, neutrality and territorial integrity of the Swiss Confederation' was under attack. In the light of this interpretation, Barth was asked: (a). whether he agreed with the call to 'nuclear rearmament' and (b). whether he was willing to accept nuclear warfare.

Barth's response to these nuclear issues was that to use his quotation to support nuclear rearmament and nuclear warfare was 'sheer malevolence' and 'sheer dishonesty'.⁵² He maintained

⁴⁹ 'The Barmen Theological Declaration, Theses 2 and 3, in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 79.

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay* (Fontana: 1971) 82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 82.

⁵² *Ibid.* 82.

that this statement and his concept of the extreme case must be understood strictly within the particular historical and political context in which he spoke and acted. Nuclear rearmament and nuclear warfare do not fit into his concept of the extreme case. The nature of nuclear weapons and their capacity for total destruction make it impossible to defend nuclear rearmament and nuclear warfare on the basis of the just war (*bellum justum*) doctrines. He expresses his position forcefully and unambiguously thus:

Nuclear warfare from the outset means the end of all things. It makes waging war senseless. And that is the point that is missing in my book (i.e. III/4). In connection with the idea of the just war, I should have said that, in considering the question of whether a war is just or not, *not only its cause and meaning must be taken into account, but also the manner of its waging*. Had I done that, I should have been bound to conclude that *no nuclear war can be just war. Such a war can be nothing but unjust, and the Christian can have no alternative but to refuse it.*⁵³

It is clear enough from Barth's statement that he was strongly against nuclear rearmament and nuclear warfare. But whether what he said can be taken to imply that Barth would have been a unilateralist or a multilateralist, whether he would have supported the policy of deterrence or not, one cannot be sure.

3. *Anti-Communist Crusade*

In the C/D III/4 Barth made the following statement which was later used to justify the anti-Communist crusade:

There may well be bound up with the independent life of a nation responsibility for the whole physical, intellectual and spiritual life of the people comprising it, and therefore their relationship to God. It may well be that in and with the independence of a nation there is entrusted to its people something which . . . they may not therefore surrender.⁵⁴

For the anti-Communist campaigners, Communist ideology involves nothing less than spiritual murder. They interpret Barth's view that in an extreme case where the 'spiritual life of the people comprising' a nation is attacked, the citizens of the nation have to defend their country, as granting support to their anti-Communist Crusade. For them, Communist Russia and their

⁵³ Ibid. 83. Insertion and underlining my own.

⁵⁴ C/D III/4, 462.

allies are a threat not only to their nations but to their own spiritual relationship to God. Therefore they argue that the defence of the Berlin wall by nuclear weapons is a justified anti-Communist stance.

Barth's reply to the anti-Communist crusaders took two forms. Firstly, he explained that when he had written that statement in 1951, he had been thinking specifically of the many people in Switzerland who had wanted to give in to Hitler thinking that Hitler's regime might be the dawning of a 'new age'—and Barth, quite rightly, had regarded this as a fallacious assumption. He insisted therefore that his statement must be understood within that particular context. His extreme case 'had nothing to do with Communist propaganda for atheism or an anti-Communist crusade'.⁵⁵ Secondly, he objected to those who used his statement to support the view that the Berlin wall had to be defended by nuclear arms against Communist aggression. Indeed he stated categorically that the use of nuclear weapons for the purpose of defence is 'sheer lunacy'. This cannot and must not be done because to do so could mean the total destruction of precisely that which one wanted to defend.

Conclusion

Three emphases arise out of our discussion of Karl Barth's theological perspective on war. Firstly, the Christian attitude to war must have a theological foundation, and for Karl Barth that basis can be none other than God's self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ. Secondly, both the state and every individual citizen must continually and seriously ask themselves whether they have worked and are working towards peace and the preservation of peace. In particular they must ask whether they are working towards the establishment of economic justice since economic power is a major cause of war among nations. Finally, and most specifically, Barth's concept of the exceptional case must be understood within the particular historical context in which he wrote and spoke. It cannot therefore be appealed to indiscriminately or applied universally as if it possessed the character of a general rule.

⁵⁵ Karl Barth, *Fragments Grave and Gay*, 84.