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## Timothy Gorringer's Contextualised Barth: An Article-Review<sup>1</sup>

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*Dr John McDowell, Meldrum Lecturer in Systematic Theology in New College, Edinburgh, provides us with a detailed study of some of the issues arising from Professor Gorringer's important study of Barth's theology in the light of the circumstances in which it was written.*

**Key words:** Theology; Karl Barth.

### A Full Blooded Gospel

A difference in the recording of Jesus' beatitudes to his disciples in Matthew's and Luke's Gospels is worth commenting on. The Matthean 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' (Matt. 5:3) becomes starker in the Lukan account, 'Blessed are the poor' (Lk. 6:20). Particularly noteworthy is the way these texts have frequently been read, whatever the relation may be between the two accounts.<sup>2</sup> Black liberation theologian James Cone, for example, criticises white scholastic attempts to explain away the apparent Lukan emphasis placed on the (materially) poor by assuming that the reference is to the poor *in spirit*. 'The poor in spirit' modification would then suggest that the text merely advises on the importance of some kind of spiritual discipline.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Luke is read in the light of Matthew. This is, he maintains, a way of economically and politically advantaged white people justifying their own privilege and preserving their economic status through spiritualising the Gospel.

What is apparent in Cone's and other liberationists' work is that the Gospel can and has more often than not become anaemic. This is a process of transforming the Gospel message that consequently fails to comprehend the radical horror and destructiveness

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1 Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

2 The relation has been variously conceived: source sharing, dependency upon one another's accounts, recording of similar teachings given on different occasions, etc.

3 James Cone, 'Jesus Christ in Black Theology', in Curt Coderette, et al. (eds.), *Liberation Theology: A Reader* (New York: Orbis, 1992).

of the cross,<sup>4</sup> the evilness of evil,<sup>5</sup> and the complicity of the Christian churches in maintaining and legitimating oppressive social, cultural, and economic structures.

Karl Barth famously reacted with hostility to the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. But what was worse was that 93 intellectuals signed a declaration of support for the Kaiser. Among these were many of his former theology teachers. Barth understood this act to be a providing theological legitimation for, or putting a religious halo around, the Kaiser's imperialist policy. Later in his life Barth reflected:

An entire world of theological exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which up to that point I had accepted as basically credible, was thereby shaken to the foundations, and with it everything which flowed at that time from the pens of the German theologians.<sup>6</sup>

Barth had learned that theology and ethics, theory and practice, were intrinsically related. So he reacted to this particular *ethical problem* by seeking a new *theology*, a theology that prevents 'God' from becoming a piece in any ideological game that is played for the security and justification of its players. Instead, for the Barth of the 1920s onwards the health of society, church, and persons could only be predicated on the grounds of a theology of the freedom of God. Recognising the significance and pervasiveness of this theme in Barth is now becoming more widespread, and Gorringer's study is important and timely in this regard.

- 4 The late Norris Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Donald MacKinnon, occasionally cited Bishop Butler's comment 'a ballet dance of ideas' when describing what is done to the cross in atonement theory.
- 5 The attempt to create a theodicy, a way of defending God's goodness in the face of tremendous evils, is also adjudged by Barth to make evil sound less than evil (especially in 'greater good' theodicies), i.e., less than destructive of God's goodness and human well-being [see John C. McDowell, 'Much Ado About Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing About Nothingness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (forthcoming)]; and "'Mend Your Speech a Little": Reading Karl Barth's *Das Nichtige* Through Donald MacKinnon's Tragic Vision', in Mike Higton and John C. McDowell (eds.), *Conversing With Barth* (Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate, forthcoming 2003)].
- 6 Karl Barth, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher', in *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 264. Gordon Clark misses the point of this when he complains that 'this reaction . . . is somewhat illogical – for a system of theology is not to be refuted by the supposedly dishonorable conduct of even ninety-three professors' [*Karl Barth's Theological Method* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., The Trinity Foundation, 1997), 16]. For Barth, Liberal theology was primarily indicted by virtue of not being able to have any capacity for critique of the 'war-theology'.

### And Then There Was Politics<sup>7</sup>

Much of the secondary literature on Barth's theology labours on while being pervaded by four general problems. Firstly, it frequently fails to read Barth in his context. Secondly, it often fails to appreciate how even after the 'break' from Liberalism Barth's thought grows, develops, changes, and is continually modified over the following years. Thirdly, Barth's thinking is denied its complexity by childish sloganising. While far from being alone in participating in the name calling, Evangelicals have been particularly culpable through frequent resorting to calling Barth 'universalist', 'denier of scriptural authority', 'christomonist', 'irrationalist', and so on. It is as if the terribly difficult tasks of reading, understanding, and struggling with his theological insights are thereby made unnecessary because Barth can be easily summarised and dismissed as being different from what the sloganiser holds to be theologically. Fourthly and finally, it too casually bypasses what Barth believed himself to have been doing with ethics, and more specifically politics. As Barth made clear in a later letter,

My thinking, writing and speaking developed from reacting to people, events and circumstances with which I was involved, with their questions and riddles. . . . I was, did and said it when the time had come.<sup>8</sup>

John Webster's valuable recent work has done much to suggest that the portrait of Barth as an ethically unconcerned theologian needs to be laid to rest.<sup>9</sup> Webster discovers a Barth who does dogmatics with a firm eye on ethics, and who works out the theological framework that shapes the way agents reflect on how to live and act. This is a Barth best portrayed as the figure with the bible on one hand and the newspaper on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Webster's contribution, however, does not sufficiently trace the reasons that connect the accounts that criticise Barth for being either ethically unconcerned or unable to work out his ethics from his theology. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, underlying several of these complaints is a view of God's eschatological presence that is momentary. Put less technically, this is the complaint that for Barth God's command can only be heard at the moment one acts, and not

7 My thanks are due to Alex Edwards for suggesting this phrase.

8 Barth, letter to T.A. Gill, 10 August 1957, cited in Gorrings, 16.

9 See John Webster, *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

10 This image that Barth used of himself needs to be qualified lest it suggest either that Barth conceived of church and state under the model of the two kingdoms, or that there was a symmetrical relation and interaction between these two spheres.

therefore be known through more general theological deliberation.<sup>11</sup>

While bearing certain resemblances to Webster's work,<sup>12</sup> Gorringe emphasises the cultural and political contexts of Barth's theological development. As one commentator puts it, 'it is [im]possible to ignore the political trauma that gave rise to his [viz. Barth's] theology . . . [which] was not written in "quiet times".'<sup>13</sup> What is important about Gorringe's reading is that it suggests that failing to read a thinker such as Barth in his context not only misses what he is up to, but also too readily anaesthetises the radical nature of his message. An earlier volume of 1988 shows how socially and politically damaging such a procedure can be, and how liberating any reclaiming of the politically disruptive in Barth can potentially be. So much so that one contributor eulogises that

Reading Barth in South Africa today becomes for us an enormous challenge, indeed, a crisis for the church, in particular for the Dutch Reformed Church family.<sup>14</sup>

### **Barth: the Radical 'Political Theologian'**

Gorringe's thesis is not truly original. It appears after, and is familiar with, the as yet untranslated 1972 study of Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt and also the papers collected by George Hunsinger in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*.<sup>15</sup> Marquardt's cardinal flaws were particularly in attempting to narrowly (and untheologically) provide an account of how Barth's theology developed by *being influenced by* socialist praxis. Gorringe avoids this. Gone is the highly contentious assertion that the relation between Barth's dogmatics and his ethical/political practice is simply one-way (with the movement being from that of the latter to the former). Instead, when reading Barth's theology within and through his contexts Gorringe stops short of making any grandiose claims of this sort. Barth's thinking cannot be *wholly explained by* his context and therefore reductively dismissed as a product of an arcane society [14].

11 See John C. McDowell, *Hope in Barth's Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy* (Ashgate, 2000), chapter 2.

12 Gorringe similarly maintains that human agency was *theologically* important for Barth.

13 Charles Villa-Vicencio, 'Karl Barth's "Revolution of God": Quietism or Anarchy?', in Charles Villa-Vicencio (ed.), *On Reading Karl Barth in South Africa* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 45-58 (46).

14 Dirkie Smit, 'Paradigms of Radical Grace', in Charles Villa-Vicencio, 17-43.

15 Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus. Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (München: Kaiser, 1972) and George Hunsinger (ed. and trans.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976).

Nevertheless, a question that could be asked of this book is what theological difference it makes to so contextualise a thinker. In other words, while it may make historically useful points Gorringe does not sufficiently address the larger question of what it is that enables one to 'transcend' one's own particular context and become interesting to, normative for, or interrogative of another society or culture.

Worth pressing is the fact that much contemporary theology admits that one can never think or act outside of one's context. 'I was born somewhere', admits the phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur.<sup>16</sup> People are always situated and therefore learn and grow through interaction with the particular contexts, people, places, etc. that aid in the shaping of the manner in which learning is done. What that awareness of contextualisation can do to our God-talk, then, is to discipline its tendencies to wander off into prematurely grand claims of our being able to see and tell the Truth. As Barth was only too aware, we can only see through a glass darkly, but one day we will (the 'will' being here a statement of Christian *hope*) see face to face. Torrance claims that

Theological knowledge can never come to an end, but is by its very nature, at least for mortals on earth and pilgrims in history, a perpetual inquiry and a perpetual prayer that take place in the interval between the inception of faith and final vision. There will be no possibility, therefore, of abstracting from the substance of theology some final theological method which can then be wielded magisterially to subdue all doctrines to some rigid pattern, and there will be no possibility of reaching final solutions to theological problems.<sup>17</sup>

#### *What Kind of Contextualisation?*

Another way of asking this question of the book is to inquire 'what kind of contextualisation?' it is doing. The strategy of 'contextualisation' promoted by the book traces and explains Barth's writings in the context of their times, particularly the political affairs of the period in which they were composed. However, as hinted at above, there is another sense in which one could do 'contextual' study, and that is by seeing how the context affected not only the shape but the content of the writing. So Marquardt, for example, explains the development of Barth's theology in the light of his socialist commitments. While this kind of work begs the question of what it is that sets anyone apart from their own time, it nevertheless indicates that

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16 Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, trans. Charles A. Kelbey (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 20.

17 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 72.

thinking – even theological thinking – can never free of broad cultural, social, and political considerations.

Sensibly without falling into the trap of one-sidedness in choosing one aspect of the ‘chicken-and-egg’ syndrome, Gorringer does not dismiss the possibility that Barth’s theology was determined, influenced, shaped, etc. by his context. Indeed, he goes so far as suggest that

The rediscovery of God [or rather, a certain type of God] was not the result of philosophical labours but part of a movement of vehement social involvement [37].

However, is there a tension in the claim that Barth’s theology responded to political events in the sense that it was variously influenced by them and Barth’s idea that Christian ethics (and therefore politics) is to be theologically grounded? In a review of Gorringer’s book, Randall E. Otto suggests that

As much as Barth read the Bible with his newspaper in hand, surely he intended the Bible to be the only source of revelation to mould his theology and proclamation to church and society. The assumption that context significantly affected Barth’s construction might thus seem to contradict Barth’s own stated intentions, particularly his famous opposition to natural theology.<sup>18</sup>

Otto has here put his finger on a significant problem for thinkers who claim simple starting-points such as scripture alone, reason alone, etc., when blindly unaware of the various presuppositions (cultural, philosophical, ethical) that are being brought to bare on their scriptural hermeneutics and subsequent theological formulations. It is not clear, however, that Barth was as guilty of this simple theological foundationalism (founding his theology in a secure point) as Otto implies. It is not entirely clear further how Gorringer would himself respond to this question since he never explicitly raises it. While certainly wanting to understand the message of the scriptures better, Barth was aware that God’s voice may potentially be heard elsewhere in a way that shines a new light back upon the scriptures.<sup>19</sup> The *Church Dogmatics*, for example, is replete with instances of Barth’s use of non-theological elements as means of better explaining the Gospel.

Moreover, Barth was attentive to the fact that readers inevitably bring their presuppositions to their readings of texts. He declared it to be ‘comical’ to imagine that we could read a text without presup-

18 Randall E. Otto, ‘Review of Timothy Gorringer’s *Karl Barth Against Hegemony*’, *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 7.2 (2000), 189-191 (190).

19 Barth famously declared that God could speak ‘through Russian communism, through a flute concerto, through a blossoming shrub or through a dead dog’ [*CD*, I.1, 60f.].

positions [CD, I.2, 468]. The question for Barth was, rather, what the presuppositions are that the text is read with since some are more appropriate than others, and whether those presuppositions are held open to the possibility of modification in the light of the text's subject-matter.

Finally, as already suggested above, Barth was aware of the danger of claiming too much for his own theology, conscious of the continual distorting influences of sin and of the eschatological proviso hanging over all attempts to think and act.<sup>20</sup> Human beings remain sinners even in the event of revelational-encounter, and therefore cannot wholly appropriate that which is being revealed [CD, I.1, 189f.].<sup>21</sup> In *all* human reflection, then, in its endless critical service of 'pure doctrine' for ecclesiastical proclamation, there can be no inerrant product or securing either the bases or results of theology. Barth even speaks of the scriptural writers' fallibility, their *capacity* for and consequent *possibility* of error, although this is not to admit the *actuality of errors*.<sup>22</sup> *All* human products are *necessarily* fallible, fragile, broken, penultimate, and de-coloured by sin. Certainty and assurance, then, cannot pertain to any human endeavours, but can only be obtained momentarily in fresh renewals of the revelatory event.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps he may be faulted with not frequently lending his own presuppositions to examination. But that he did not consider his theologising to produce unmediated oracles is emphasised.

Nevertheless, the question of how any word in time can transcend its spatio-temporal boundaries remains an important question both for Barth-students and theologians in general. What is it that enables one to continue using language of 'truth'?

The second underlying motif in Gorringer's study has to do with how Barth was involved with his context theologically.

What cannot be doubted is that Barth *believed* that, *precisely as a theologian*, he was making a contribution to the struggle against Hitler [20].

20 Temporality is eschatologically conceived as a time of: 'not yet', 'between times', 'interim period' [CD, I.1, 51; I.2, 408, 421, 423, 430f., 643]; interval between the ascension and second coming [CD, I.2, 676ff., 692f.]; human standing in the midst of conflict and tension [CD, I.2, 269, 363, 431]. Nevertheless, it is a time 'which is determined by the Word of God in the prophetic and apostolic witness' [CD, I.2, 693], a time of authentic joy. Accordingly, *all* human (and therefore even ecclesial) thought is located 'between the times' [CD, I.1, 334].

21 Perhaps one could also mention the infinite richness of the God beyond conceptualising at this point mentioned by Barth in, for example, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (London: Collins, 1963).

22 See, e.g., CD, I.2, 509. Barth speaks of the humanity of scripture [e.g., CD, I.2, 513] and dogma [e.g., CD, I.2, 513; 474, 636].

23 This is why Barth eschews all conceptual foreclosures or, what he calls 'systematisation'.

Therefore, the Barth whose *magnum opus* appears to be silent about 'ordinary' affairs of his day is understood to have been thoroughly responsive to the events of his day. Gorringer suggests that Barth's fundamental critiques are often unspoken (although he does not ask with any conviction why Barth follows such a style) [19].<sup>24</sup> Hence Barth insists in 1932 that *CD I.1* has political implications despite politics not being explicitly mentioned. As a statement made in 1939 explains, 'Wherever there is theological talk, it is always implicitly or explicitly political talk also.'<sup>25</sup> Hence, Gorringer's contextual reading of Barth's theology is correct to argue that

the great theme of his theology, from start to finish, is that the reality of God, and faith as response to that reality, is not a prop for the infirm, an opiate for the masses, nor an optional extra in the culture of contentment, but an essential aspect of human liberation, that without which human liberation cannot be achieved.

The world's life-styles are precisely the concern of theology. Therefore,

Not just in 1933, though critically then, Barth believed that a Church obedient to the Word *made a difference*. [22]

## The Chapters

### *What is Barth 'Against'? (Chapter 1, 'Theology As Struggle Against Hegemony')*

After explaining that a countering of hegemony is an important aspect of Barth's project, Gorringer clarifies what it is that the 'Against' in the book's sub-title refers to. Primarily this is any ideology (any absolutising of theoretical and practical ideas) that would bind the Gospel to any framework of interpretation. So, for example, in the 1920s Barth stringently opposes von Harnack's practice of interpreting God on the basis of culture or ethics; in the 1930s National Socialism; later the valorisation of the capitalist liberal state and McCarthyite hysteria; and continually throughout his career

24 After all, one could mention that the theological response to Rudolf Bultmann silently undergirds *CD IV.1* in particular, and yet his opponent receives little in the way of explicit mention.

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

'natural theology'.<sup>26</sup>

Over against all self-existent and 'natural' theologies he sets the reality of the God who loves in freedom – the One who can in no circumstances ever be colonized or be the subject of any hegemony. [5]

Of course, particularly from the mid 1920s on, Barth's emphasises this divine No to the world only as an aspect of the prior Yes. Hence, the negative sub-title of the book appears a little odd, and Gorringer does acknowledge the partiality of the description while supporting Clifford Green's title *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* [1].<sup>27</sup>

Gorringer approvingly cites a comment by Leuba from 1947 to the effect that Barth should be read 'prophetically'<sup>28</sup> rather than 'systematically'. This gives a sense of Barth being "above all concerned with the way in which God's Word opens history, rather than . . . [with] setting out an account of the divine essence' [8]. This, however, does not clarify matters much, since the early stages of the study do not specify what Barth is rejecting when avoiding *systematic* theology (an edifice for the *final description* of God and God's ways with the world) and could misleadingly suggest that Barth was not in the business of providing an account, in all its admitted fragility and provisionality, of the trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ. (Perhaps Gorringer is advertising to certain Fathers who, in their own trinitarian theologies, refused to define the divine 'essence' which is *essentially* unknown and unknowable.) For Barth, as Gorringer does rightly maintain, the theological and political are not separable even if they are distinguishable in their necessary interaction. It is the nature of that interaction that is crucial to appreciating what Barth is up to.

*The Making of a Liberating Theology of Freedom (Chapter 2, 'God's Revolution')*

Chapter 2 details the now familiar story of Barth's early theologico-

26 By 'natural theology' Barth intends all forms of theology which do not begin exclusively from the known *Ratio* of God [See *CD*, I.1, 36, 219. While Barth does utilise Kant's metaphysics-critique, he theologically rejects an *a priori* philosophical agnosticism as a negative natural theology (see *CD*, I.2, 29f.; 244f.; II.1, 183)]. Natural theology, in both its epistemically Pelagian (human discovery of God) and Semi-Pelagian (human discovery of God aided by grace) forms, operates as a 'good and useful narthex or first stage on the way to the true Christian revelation', gained quite apart from that revelation [*Göttingen Dogmatics*, 91; cf. *CD*, I.1, 385; II.1, 86ff., 231].

27 Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (London: Collins, 1989).

28 In an address of 1922, Barth claims that he intends his work to be 'as a kind of marginal note, a gloss . . . a *corrective*, as the 'pinch of spice in the food,' as Kierkegaard says' [*Word of God Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1928), 98].

political development from Barth's student days to his authorship of the second edition of his 'commentary' on *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921), of his being inspired by the socialism of his day but then his becoming critical of it.

Gorringe describes how Barth, even in his time as a student, felt a tension between his appreciation of German culture and the general radical anti-bourgeois critique that was becoming increasingly fashionable and something that he appeared to have been involved in, on the other. This tension became somewhat resolved in the immediately succeeding years in the direction of socialist-style praxis, with the post-1911 'red pastor' becoming actively involved in his parish's social problems. '[T]ouched for the first time by the real needs of life', as he reflected later, Barth put into practice the political allegiances that he had become sensitive to at least since his contributions to the Christian socialist journal (*Neue Wege*) and his 1906 talk to a Bern student association ('Zofing and the Social Question').<sup>29</sup>

It is worth mentioning, since Gorringe does not emphasise it enough, that this move itself contributed significantly to Barth's 'turn away' from liberal theology. For example, Barth's teacher Wilhelm Herrmann was politically conservative, and Barth himself had doubted that his theological education had appropriately trained him for the practical rigours of parish ministry. In developing a more socialist theological ethic Barth was, to a great degree, beginning to move away from a certain liberal concentration on the individual's *Gotteserlebnis* (experience of God) and allowing his new found political 'radicalism' to interrogate existing affairs. In other words, Barth's 'break' was the culmination of several years of moving in a somewhat different direction. After all, the way the war affected Barth differed from the way it affected many others.

Gorringe highlights the fact that this period witnessed Barth's own growing uneasiness with socialism itself, and not merely with its religious wing. This is suggested by a statement of 1915 that reflects his disillusionment with the failure of the Democratic Socialist Party to resist the war: 'The religious socialist thing is out, taking God seriously begins.'<sup>30</sup> Barth's encounter with Christoph Blumhardt in 1916, his 'discovery' of the 'Strange New World Within the Bible',<sup>31</sup> and his

29 Barth cited in Gorringe, 30.

30 Barth cited in Gorringe, 34.

31 This was the title of a lecture of 1916 [*The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 28-50]. Gorringe is on good grounds, given Barth's earlier broad appreciation of religious socialism, and his reaction to the politics of the *Kriegstheologie* (war-theology) when arguing that 'The rediscovery of God [or rather, a certain type of God] was not the result of philosophical labours but part of a movement of vehement social involvement' [37].

disillusionment with the path taken by the Russian Revolution of 1919,<sup>32</sup> all served to reinforce a feeling that eventually erupted into pronouncement of divine *krisis* over or judgment on the nature of the claims of religious socialism as much as over theological liberalism and idealism (the first edition of the *Römerbrief*, 1919), or religion, church and culture (the second edition of the *Römerbrief*, 1922).

According to Barth, the strange new world, or the eschatological irruption of God's kingdom into time, shatters human delusions over the eternal significance of human achievements. All identifications of human achievements with the kingdom of God are to be seen as idolatrous, an admission that provides the theological backdrop for Barth's later critique of Nazism and which in its turn fuelled the passions of his rejection of the implicit natural theology that he detected in Brunner in the 1930s.

What Gorringer says about the iconoclastic nature of Barth's theology of revelation of the 1930s echoes what could be said of what Barth is doing at this early stage:

That God cannot be colonized is the implication of Barth's language about the objectivity of revelation. . . . It is the dialectic of authority and freedom which is intended to prevent the obvious objection that what we end up calling the Word of God is simply our own invention [137f.].

*Learning Academic Business (Chapter 3 'Between the Times')*

In his introduction Gorringer had mentioned the significance of Barth's Swiss nationality, that despite Barth's claiming to feel at home in Germany his non-Germanness created a feeling of difference-in-identity with German culture [11ff.]. Undoubtedly this surfaced in his lambasting the German war policy and the theology that fed and colluded with it between 1914 and 1918. This ethnic difference-even-within-identity was felt strongly in the 1920s, and powerfully asserted itself later in Barth's stand against the Nazis in the 1930s.

Chapter 3 covers the period October 1921-March 1930, from Barth's first academic appointment in Göttingen to the end of his second post at Münster. To all appearances this was a period out of politics. Gorringer claims that Barth spent his time concentrating on doing theology (he presented major lecture series on Calvin, Schleiermacher, and dogmatics). Barth was politically *quieter* partly because of his Swiss shyness of getting involved in German affairs when in that German land, and also because during this period he had hopes for the fledgling post-WWI Weimar democracy.

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32 It is questionable whether Gorringer has sufficiently developed Barth's reaction to this event.

Nevertheless, and here Gorringer makes an important contribution to the general knowledge of Barth's development, Barth 'was not politically asleep either' [86]. In his lectures on Calvin of 1922 and his later lectures on ethics he developed the interrelation of theory and praxis, theology and ethics. Moreover, his lectures' struggle for a new theological realism, one that would not permit 'God-talk' to be sentimental reflections of the speaker's desires, accentuated Barth's appreciation that all theology worthy of the name is ideology critique, and for that reason a means of liberation. One is set before an inescapable 'Thou' who cannot be colonised or domesticated into culturally and politically conservative thoughts.

[H]e developed the insight gained in Safenwil, that theology involves an attack on idols, namely, ideology critique. But ideology critique is quite ineffective if there is not something better to put in its place: hence ten years spent largely on architectural sketches and foundations, digging to substantiate the insights already won through to. 'The concern of the Word of God is daily life.' For Barth there could not be a divide between practical and dogmatic theology because there is nothing more practical, more vital for every human concern, than God's Word. For this reason, on both fronts, the theology of this period is political theology. [115]

Not only was Barth laying down the lines that would become recognisably developed in the *Church Dogmatics*, but he was also realising theologically the relation between theory and praxis.

In his dogmatic work throughout the 1920s Barth was laying the foundations for the struggle against fascism which was to follow. . . . What he was trying to do in these years, by way of critique and construction, was to find a proper theological response to hegemony [114, 115]

*Refusing Nazi Hegemony (Chapter 4 'The Struggle Against Fascism')*

If, as Gorringer had asserted earlier, Barth, not unlike many of his contemporaries, had in the late 1920s underestimated the threat posed by the Nazis [86] this was not the case with the 1930s. During this time Barth was influential on the rise of the 'Confessing Church', loudly spoke of resistance to the Nazis and refused to give the Hitler oath required of public servants, was subsequently dismissed in June 1935, had all his works banned from Germany in 1938, and even was rebuked by the university of Basle for his outspoken anti-Nazism.

It is against this background . . . that we are to understand the mounting vehemence and intransigence of Barth's attack on natural theology [and religion] through the 1930s. [130]

Barth regarded Nazism's religious rhetoric, and the increasingly popular claims that the rise of Nazism was a source of special new revelation, as a paradigm of the procedure of natural theology, much as the

war-theology of 1914 had been critiqued as ideology. 'The God whom we can know apart from revelation seems to be a construct of human thinking.' [138]

[T]he reason for the priority of revelation in Barth's theology . . . is bound up with the struggle against hegemony. That God cannot be colonized is the implication of Barth's language about the objectivity of revelation. . . . It is the dialectic of authority and freedom which is intended to prevent the obvious objection that what we end up calling the Word of God is simply our own invention. [137f.]

It is this that lends weight to the strength of Barth's vehemence against his former theological ally, Emil Brunner, over Brunner's claim that even after the Fall humans beings possessed a 'capacity for revelation'. Barth felt that this weakens both the extent of the Fall and the reality of grace.<sup>33</sup>

### *Hope in the Cold (Chapter 5 'Nevertheless!')*

Chapter 5 covers the period 1942-1951. It has puzzled some commentators that Barth responded to these events with the positive and rather joyful mood of *CD III, The Doctrine of Creation*. Horton, for example, claims that Barth was not as good a prophet to the post-WWII age of anxiety as he was to the age of over-confidence which preceded it.<sup>34</sup> However, Barth had learned of the importance of Christian *hope* because of his understanding of Jesus Christ as God's-being-for-the-world. This enabled him to consequently undermine theologically the basis of the cultural distress and therefore promote a very different theological sense/mood from that of 1922. So in 1948 he declares:

It is easy to be afraid anywhere in the world today. The whole of the Western world, the whole of Europe is afraid, afraid of the East. But we must not be afraid. . . . Everything is in the hands of God.<sup>35</sup>

Gorringe is sensitive to Barth's theological mood during this period and traces Barth's theology of the period particularly through the themes of the goodness of the creature as creature, humanity's body-soul unity, and the limitation of the life-span of evil before a victorious God.

If ever there was a period when the prophet of doom could wag his finger it was this one. Barth refuses. . . . No doctrine of creation, apart from that of Leibniz, has been more gloriously affirmative of the goodness of the

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33 The page numbers for the unfortunately too briefly treated dispute are wrongly given as 133 and 134, rather than 131 and 132.

34 Walter M. Horton, 'How Barth Has Influenced Me', *Theology Today* 13 (1956), 359.

35 Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: SCM, 1954), 99.

creature and of the created order. . . .It is a blazing 'nevertheless' to the misery of the years of war and the Holocaust. [216]

Barth, as Gorringer describes, developed the thought that human action can become a parable of or analogy to the kingdom of God.

The concept of parable goes beyond the eschatological proviso and shows that the Kingdom of God is not an individual and symbolic reality but presses us towards the realization of a brotherly human society in salvation in communion with God. [168]

Particularly controversial was Barth's refusal to condemn communism in the manner he had Nazism during a period when the Stalinist atrocities were coming to light. Gorringer summarises Barth's reply to Brunner's criticism:

What was the point of repeating as a theologian what every newspaper was saying in every column? [170]

and adds that Barth sought a third way between communism and capitalism, a socialist critique of capitalism which was not committed to Stalinism. A form of social democracy was what Barth imagined the closest fit to his conception of the kingdom of God to be.

*The Freedom of Reconciliation (Chapter 6 'Jesus Means Freedom')*

The period 1951-1961 witnessed European rebuilding in the aftermath of the war, becoming therefore a period conducive to new hope. Yet the cold war burned in the political imagination and secularisation was a serious challenge to the strength of the churches. Barth wrote *CD IV, The Doctrine of Reconciliation* at this time, although the planned IV.4 was never completed.<sup>36</sup> Justification and sanctification, Gorringer describes, are here Barth's foundation and presupposition of liberation – liberation is the goal at which they aim. What this amounts to is the developing of the doctrine of reconciliation around the theme of the covenant or right relationships. Jesus is in favour of the meek, lowly and poor, and this critiques the political order, the contemporary one which is capitalist. Consequently, zeal for God, learned in and through the invocation of God in prayer ('Our Father . . . hallowed be Thy Name') entails revolt, rebellion and resistance against the regime of vacillation,

not against people, but *for* all humankind and therefore against the disorder which controls and poisons and disrupts all human relations and interconnections. [265]

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36 He published fragments of it as IV.4 on baptism, but his notes and lectures that would have completed this part-volume were only posthumously published as *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4, Lecture Fragments*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981).

The church is the image of this liberating movement, living for the world as God's beloved and active in solidarity with it against sin and unrighteousness.

God chooses to involve human beings in the process. Christ in the Spirit empowers us to a life of resistance and revolt. [267]

*God's World Revolution (Chapter 7 'Theology and Human Liberation')*

This chapter seems to act as a conclusion, summarising the themes that Gorringer had emphasised in his introduction and then traced historically in the following chapters – the centrality of freedom given by God in Christ for his beloved creation in bondage. Gorringer is led through his reflections on God 'the Liberator' and Christ as 'partisan of the poor', then, to assert that 'Barth has some claim to be a liberation theologian before his time.' [269] This, as Paul Lehman is cited as arguing, entails that Barth may be seen as a 'theologian of permanent revolution'.

Although theology is no enemy to mankind, at its core it is a critical, in fact a revolutionary affair, because as long as it has not been shackled, its theme is the new man in the new cosmos.<sup>37</sup>

### **Concluding Assessment: Is Gorringer's Barth Sufficiently Liberating?**

T.F. Torrance pays tribute to Barth by describing him as a modern theological father of the Christian church. The sheer volume of material now being published on Barth's work certainly suggests that there is something in this eulogy, even if it is still too early to assess his enduring significance. Good treatments of Barth's ethics and politics are important, albeit relatively recent, additions to this mass of commentary. What sets Gorringer's study apart from others here is the breadth of his analysis. Not only has the radical political dimension been noticed as necessary to an adequate grasp of Barth's development and theology, but also this theme is traced through the entire span of Barth's life and work.

Gorringer accents the political significance of Barth's theology of divine freedom, and rightly distinguishes Barth's account of freedom here from accounts of it as freedom of choice. For Barth a responsible freedom is a being-for-others. This is the liberating freedom of the God 'who loves in freedom [and who] can and does ground all life-giving action' [144]. In other words,

far from leading to an alienation of the natural order the Christological grounding of Barth's theology is in fact the most detailed and profound

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37 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 119, cited in Gorringer, 289f.

reworking of Aquinas's famous assertion that grace does not destroy but perfects nature [145].

The question needs to be asked, however, whether Barth was systematic enough in pushing through the implications of his theology of freedom. Critics often cite Barth's treatment of women in *CD* III as having a patriarchal flavour.<sup>38</sup> Gorringer expresses his disquiet with Barth's treatment here, but this disquiet is only briefly expressed on an issue that is a source of real concern for contemporary theology in general and the reception of Barth in particular. This question or problem could be seen as being no mere aside but rather being a test case of how constrained the theology of freedom can be at its root.

Therefore, the question remains: is Barth sufficiently attentive to the various nuances of freedom, or does this patriarchal reading of male-female relations reflect a more serious and deep rooted flaw in his theology? This is a very complicated set of questions, but it appears that Gorringer suggests that in Barth's theology as a whole there are enough resources for a liberating freedom to critique his patriarchal anthropology.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps one could, with Gorringer, cite Barth's *Evangelical Theology*:

Although theology is no enemy to mankind [and womankind], at its core it is a critical, in fact a revolutionary affair, because as long as it has not been shackled, its theme is the new man<sup>40</sup> in the new cosmos.<sup>41</sup>

This, as Gorringer has argued, is the Gospel of freedom.

It is further worth mentioning that Gorringer's table entitled 'Appendix: Barth's Work in Context' [292-301] provides a very useful resource for guiding Barth-students. It not only lists when and what Barth's did and published, but also sets these alongside other important publications and cultural works of that time. Where the table is misleading, however, is in the fact that it does not give enough of a sense of how Barth's actual *writing* was being affected by the political events of the day. The correlation between the columns 'History' and 'Barth's Publications' misses the fact that Barth's writings would have been composed over the year or two before the actual date of their publication.

The book does have several limitations. The level it is written at

38 See Katherine Sonderegger, 'Barth and Feminism' in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 258-273.

39 See Paul S. Fiddes, 'The Status of Woman in the Thought of Karl Barth', in Janet Martin Soskice (ed.), *After Eve: Women, Theology and the Christian Tradition* (London: Collins, 1990), 138-155.

40 Here the gender specific term may be appropriately retained in order to specify the eschatological human being, Jesus Christ.

41 Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 119, cited by Gorringer, 289f.

would appear to require some (perhaps even intimate) knowledge of Barth's writings. There are numerous untranslated German terms. There is no critical theological interaction with Barth, and little with many popular criticisms of Barth's theology (some of which may have political import). The detailing is, of course, selective, and so there is no concentrated treatment of the intellectual background to Barth's stance on revelation from the fathers, Calvin, and Hegel, for example. The theological importance of Pierre Maury's 1936 lecture on election, working itself out vitally in Barth's *CD* II.2, is not accorded its proper weight in the assessment of the development of Barth's theology.<sup>42</sup> Further, if Barth is being placed in his context it seems odd that there could be little discussion of the impact that friends, family and especially Charlotte von Kirschbaum, had on Barth.<sup>43</sup> And finally, Gorringer does not ask any of the more systematic theological questions concerning his 'discoveries'.

Nevertheless, this study should be highly commended to all Barth students and all those interested in moving beyond the misplaced and childish sloganising that has plagued much of Barth's reception in Britain and N. America. As an academic study of the contextualisation of Barth, it should seed many further accounts not only of Barth's thought in and of itself but also of its enduring significance. As Gorringer concludes, 'he is amongst those [viz. Augustine, Luther, Schleiermacher] who 'are not dead, but live'. As they were a vital part of his context, so he is of ours.' [288]

Moreover, for anyone tempted to imagine that theology and ethics, reflection and praxis, are separable, or to imagine further that Christian hope leaves the structures of this world untouched, this book is well worth reading. Barth, as rightly Gorringer notes, disrupts the dualisms of body-soul, and God-world. The presence of God in and to his world is known through his incarnation in Jesus Christ as the liberating presence of God for his *whole world*.

### Abstract

In recent years there has been a recognition that Barth was concerned theologically with how to live. Timothy Gorringer's study of Barth is an important contribution of this 'turn to the ethical', and in particular the political, Barth. This article seeks to critically review

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42 It is mentioned on 148. On this see John C. McDowell, 'Learning Where to Place One's Hope: The Eschatological Significance of Election in Barth', *SJT* 53 (2000), 316-338.

43 It is worth remembering that one's context is always *more than* the sum of one's interactions with some general culture and politics.

Gorringer's book by demonstrating the significance of its thesis on the politics of the divine freedom, perceive its limitations, and suggest ways of further developing its illuminating treatment of Barth's theological development.

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