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## BARTH'S CONCEPT AND CRITICISM OF RELIGION

Abstract of Thesis presented to the University of Durham for the Degree of Master of Arts, by Edgar C Ruddock B.A. Dip. Th:

The Thesis is set within the pastoral problem of how Karl Barth was to preach meaningfully to his congregations. For this study, the problem of religion was raised through concern over the relationship between institutional religion and living faith; over questions about the content of religious language, and the relevance of a largely conceptual religion to the concrete thought-forms of modern urban man.

The study begins with an assessment of the significance of Barth's early years and theological development, and then moves on to sketch in some of Barth's major theological themes. There then follows a textual analysis of Barth's commentary on Romans Chapter 7, and the section in the Church Dogmatics (1.2) entitled 'The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion'. These are compared and contrasted, and linked to some biblical themes. The question of religion is then set in its historical context, attention being paid to Barth's understanding of the problem of religion in theology, to the distinctive characteristics of nineteenth century theology as they affected Barth's thought, and also to the debate between Karl Barth and Adolph von Harnack.

Next attention is paid to Barth's methodology, assessing particularly the significance for the concept of religion of the Dialectical Method, and then more specifically of the influence on Barth of Søren Kierkegaard. The final section seeks to explore the way forward, assessing Barth's concept of true religion, and then asking what light is thrown on the concept of religion by Martin Buber. The thesis then concludes with a brief assessment of the significance of Barth's critique of religion for the modern church.

**BARTH'S CONCEPT AND CRITICISM OF RELIGION**

**A Thesis submitted to the University of Durham for  
the degree of Master of Arts by  
Edgar C Ruddock, B.A. Dip.Th  
1976**

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## BARTH'S CONCEPT AND CRITICISM OF RELIGION

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## BARTH'S CONCEPT AND CRITICISM OF RELIGION

### a) General : Introduction

It is no mere co-incidence that some of the most formative times in the thinking of Karl Barth were the years he spent in pastoral work in Switzerland, most notably those at Safenwil. The context of his theological development was a deep concern for the people among whom he worked. What was it that he could meaningfully preach to them week by week? In what way could the Christian message be proclaimed in the emerging and fast changing world of the twentieth century ?

It is from a similarly practical problem that this present study has been inspired. The question that has prompted a study of the concept 'religion' is one that has presented itself on different levels: on one level it concerns the relationship of institutional religion to living faith; on another, it raises the question of the content of religious language and the relationship between symbol and reality; and on yet another level it concerns the actual way in which people from different cultural backgrounds think – how can a man who is used only to thinking through concrete situations learn to handle concepts, which are the normal vehicles of supposedly 'religious' ideas ?

The problem of institutional religion is not one merely of the failure of a particular church at a particular time to relate its message, or to preach adequately, to the world it serves: neither is it necessarily concerned with the problem of authority or direct association with the secular society. Rather, it concerns the way in which God's Truth is first received, then communicated, and then, to a lesser or greater degree, enshrined in the credal or dogmatic statements that the religious community hands on to successive generations. How does God communicate Himself? How is that communication received, and then how is it transmitted to others without losing its actual content?

This leads in turn to the problem of religious language. At what stage does language cease to convey content, and become after all nothing but a scaffolding within which the building has been demolished? This is an issue that relates equally to the communication of a divine event to others than those who experienced it, and to the 'laying up' of a theological truth discovered in history, in some form of credal statement. The question here concerns the relationship of the hearer to what is heard, and of the speaker to the message being communicated.

The third problem mentioned above is both akin to, and separate from those already outlined. If we are talking, very tentatively at this stage, about God's self-communication, then there is both a distinction and a relationship between the actual communication, and the method by which it takes place. The problem that

concerns us here is the different methods of receiving communication that are experienced by different groups of people. Without in any way pre-judging the relationship between religion and culture, it may be observed on a purely sociological level that vast differences in human thought-patterns do exist. What is readily comprehended by a philosopher is nonsense to a factory worker: similarly, what may be right or true to a closely-knit group of deprived children, may make no sense at all to a group of academically trained students. Now if content of God's self-communication is handed on in a largely conceptual manner, there is clearly a section of any audience for whom this supposed communication will not be communication at all.

Such then are some of the issues that have brought the question of 'religion', however we shall finally define it, to the forefront of our attention. We must now attempt to outline the manner in which our enquiry will be conducted.

In considering the concept and criticism of religion in Barth, we shall have to commence with a brief glance at the life of the man himself, pointing out in particular the peculiarity of Barth's position in relation to history. This will apply both to the general historical situation of the early twentieth century, and also to Barth's relationship to the theological development of the previous century. It will be necessary also to put into perspective some of the technical usages of Barth's own theological language.

We shall then look closely at what Barth actually says about the term 'Religion': this will refer us both to his commentary on Romans 7, and also to his chapter in the Dogmatics (1.2) entitled 'Revelation as the Abolition and Exaltation of Religion'. The text of each will be summarised, discussed and compared. We shall then look in particular at the use Barth makes of metaphors to put across his concept of religion in the chapter on Romans 7, and also at the relationship between Barth's use of the term 'religion', and St Paul's understanding of both Law and Flesh.

It will then be necessary to set Barth's discussion in its historical context. This will be undertaken by considering first Barth's argument concerning 'The problem of Religion in Theology' – tracing the emergence of the concept that gives Barth his specialised use of the word 'religion', and noting its growing importance with the passing of time. We shall then look in particular at the implications for Barth of nineteenth century theology from Schleiermacher to Harnack. This will provide a basis for a discussion of the significance for our subject of the Barth–Harnack correspondence of 1923.

The next section will attempt to consider the implications of Barth's methodology. This will involve looking in particular at his use of the dialectic method. Part of this discussion will consider the influence on Barth of Søren Kierkegaard, and the

concept of 'paradox'. The final section of our study will then try to develop the meaning of Barth's concept of 'true religion', looking at its relation to Jesus Christ, to the church, and then also to the concept of 'immediacy' particularly as worked out in the writings of Martin Buber. A conclusion will then be attempted, to draw out the implications of the study to the questions already raised above.

#### **b) The significance of Barth's early years**

Karl Barth, who was born in Basel on the 10th May 1886 was not unfamiliar with the world of theology from the very start, since his Father, Fritz, was himself a professor of New Testament. But his own theological training took him, as a student, to Bern, Berlin, Tübingen and Marburg. These varied situations allowed him to study under some of the best known and most influential theologians of his day – among them both Adolf von Harnack, and Wilhelm Herrmann. Of Barth's dissociation from Harnack more will be said later, but suffice it to point out that Harnack was undoubtedly the leading exponent of the Ritschlian theology at the beginning of the twentieth century. However strong the disagreement was to become, Barth never lost his veneration for this great man. Similarly, from Herrmann he admits to learning a great deal, particularly the need to resist engaging in apologetics. (1)

The serious doubts, however, as to the value of the Ritschlian methodology, gathered momentum once Barth commenced his pastoral work as an assistant in the German speaking church in Geneva, in 1909. The great stress laid on preaching in the Reformed Church laid an awesome responsibility on the shoulders of any young minister. Barth's problem was how the preacher in the pulpit could in fact do anything more than simply speak his own mind, when in fact the congregation had come with an almost sacramental expectation of being addressed by God Himself. As he says later 'As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God ... For to speak of God seriously would mean to speak in the realm of revelation and faith'. (2)

Two years later, in 1911, Barth moved on to the pastorate of Safenwil, a small industrial town in the Aargau district of Switzerland. He wanted to speak to men, men as they are in the midst of their industrialised existence, about God. Grappling with the problem forced Barth to look again at the Bible, in order to find how to speak of God as God and not as a mere projection of mankind. As Heinz Zahrnt puts it 'He wants to speak to men, to the fabulous contradiction in their lives, but he has to do so as a pastor by means of the no less fabulous message of the Bible'. (3)

- (1) Rumscheidt Revelation and Theology C.U.P.1972. p5. and K. Barth Theologische Fragen und Antworten (1957) p25.  
 (2) The Word of God and the task of Ministry (1922) published in The Word of God and the Word of Man (E.T.1928) pp. 183, 186, 198.  
 (3) Heinz Zahrnt The Question of God (Collins 1969) p.17.

Throughout this period Barth was aided by the friendship of Eduard Thurneysen. Gradually as their relationship deepened, and as they studied together, and discussed their common pastoral problem, they began to see the total inadequacy of the nineteenth century theological tradition with which they had grown up. With every passing day the gulf that divided an anthropocentric approach to theology from a theocentric one became more and more clearly defined. Part of this process was also aided by Barth's friendship with Christoph Blumhardt. Christoph's father, Johann, had renewed an emphasis on the Kingdom of God, in the sense of God's sovereignty over all the world, a sovereignty re-asserted in the 'victory' of Jesus over all that kept men bound from a true relationship to God. Both father and son had strong links with Christian Socialism, and fearlessly spoke out against piety, and comfortable religious security. Of them, Barth says he 'felt at home with them'. Indeed, in comparing Christoph with Friedrich Naumann, Barth writes 'One thing stood out even more clearly: that there was contained in the new insight (of the Blumhardt's), because of the forgiving redeeming love which included here everything human, a comprehensive attack on the bases of present-day society, culture and church'. (4)

That the tradition of nineteenth century theology was totally inadequate as an expression of the Truth of God was finally and irrevocably brought home to Barth with the outbreak of the first world war. Later he said this:

'One day in early August 1914 stands out in my personal memory as a black day. Ninety-three German Intellectuals impressed public opinion by their proclamation in support of the war of Wilhelm II and his counsellors. Among these intellectuals I discovered to my horror almost all of my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated. In despair over what this indicated about the signs of the times I suddenly realised that I could not any longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and history. For me, at least, nineteenth-century theology no longer held any future'. (5)

This then for Barth was the great exposé of the bankruptcy of what was to him no more than an anthropocentric theology. His answer was to come five years later with the publication of the first edition of Der Römerbrief. In very briefest and broadest outline at this stage, Barth was now convinced that the theology that gained a foothold with the Enlightenment, that had grown up in an age that believed in the

(4) The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology (ed. Robinson, Jn Knox Press, 1968) p.42.

(5) The Humanity of God (Collins 1962) p.14.

ultimate supremacy of reason and the ultimate power within man to achieve all things, and that had matured in the line from Schleiermacher, through Ritschl to Harnack – that this whole theological tradition was quite unaware of the true state of man, and of the real capacity of the Living God to address man in the living present. What now had to be re-asserted was the Sovereignty of God:

‘The theme of the Bible, contrary to the critical and to the orthodox exegesis which we had inherited, certainly could not be man’s religion and religious morality, and certainly not his secret divinity. The stone wall that we ran up against was that the theme of the Bible is the deity of God, more exactly of God’s deity ...’ (6)

It is perhaps important at this stage to notice also the crisis into which the first world war had thrown the whole of European culture and civilisation. The latter part of the nineteenth century had without doubt been an age of unbounded and unparalleled optimism throughout Europe as a whole. Of particular significance had been the publication of Darwin’s Origin of Species, which, as it gained acceptance, brought with it an increased sense of the power of man to achieve his own salvation, given the time and the circumstances. Further the advance in scientific and technical knowledge only served as living evidence to man’s ability to do as he believed he could. The march was onward to Utopia, to the realisation of heaven on earth.

But the shattering thunder of war destroyed every one of these dreams. It is impossible to overstress the effect of the shock-waves of the war years. It is not surprising therefore that the publication of Der Römerbrief caused such a stir in the German theological world. That world, by virtue of its very nature, may have survived the shock of war rather better than say the world of art, but this led all the more to Der Römerbrief exploding like a bombshell (as Karl Adam called it). Its publication was not unlike in manner, though greater in impact, to that of T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’ three years later. We are dealing with an exposé of a shattered dream, and the offering of a radical alternative. Barth himself, therefore, stands at the watershed of two ages, and is therefore in a key position to make a significant breakthrough in theological method. History has shown that to be an understatement of his achievement.

That Barth’s thinking was born out of real problems in real situations is witnessed to by the movement and development within his general position. Not only did he all but completely re-write Der Römerbrief only a short while after its first publication, but the prolific nature of the successive volumes of the Church Dogmatics,

(6) Ibid p41.

and many of his shorter writings in later life show him again and again re-stating his position from a series of different standpoints. Indeed this becomes a part of his actual methodology, to look at a particular question, for example the doctrine of the Word, and approach it from a variety of different angles, leaving the reader with a clear indication not just of the parts, but also of the whole. Indeed the subtle inter-relation of Biblical exposition and theological discourse in the Dogmatics are part of a deliberate policy. Hartwell says of Barth's method of exposition, that 'it is similar to that of a pointilliste, that is, a painter who obtains his effects of light and atmosphere by small dots or points of pure colour, which, viewed at a distance, are blended into a unity by the eye'. (7) Hartwell further points out one of the major problems facing any student of an aspect of Barth's theology, that 'if we want to do justice to the one or other aspect of Barth's theology, we shall have to take into account all other aspects as well, seeing the aspect in question in the light of his whole teaching'. (8)

In the light of this it seems necessary to outline, in the briefest way possible, some of the main structures of Barth's theology both to throw light upon the particular question of religion, and also to act as a clarification of terminology.

#### c) Some outline structures for Barth's Theology:

Barth owes much of his detailed thinking about Theology to the method of St. Anselm of Canterbury. Barth's Fides Quaerens Intellectum may not be entirely fair to the Proslogion, but it does use the same general approach, and this is of fundamental significance. Theology is essentially an 'after-thinking' of faith: it presupposes faith, and thinks through after the confession of the Church. It asks the nature of the Truth believed, but asks in faith, not doubt. And there can be no finality in theological statements, since only God can fully comprehend Himself. Because of this, theology can never be complete, since its statements can always be better expressed, and better understood. It is not a form of free thinking, since it is bound to the experience of faith, and depends upon Scripture as its source and director. Theology, like Anselm's whole enquiry, is in the context of a relationship of response, and at the same time a gift of God. Because of this basic approach, it is not hard to see the extent of the revolution in his thought: he cuts himself off at once from Harnack and his other teachers, and starts to re-examine protestantism from quite a different standpoint.

If God cannot be understood except by faith, and if the human mind cannot of itself even so much as imagine the true existence of God, then it must be

(7) Hartwell — The teaching of Karl Barth on the doctrine of the Imago Dei in The Presbyter, Vol.5. No.4. (1947) p.13.

(8) Hartwell: The Theology of Karl Barth Duckworth 1964 p.17.

that if man is to know God, God reveals Himself to men. This is one of the most crucial ideas in Barth's thinking, that God speaks, acts and reveals himself to men. This revelation of God is mediated in human form in Jesus Christ, the one Word of God. All revelation from God to men is in Jesus Christ. It has taken place once antecedently in creation, once historically in the 'years of revelation', and it still does take place through the relationship between Christ and his Church. As Mackintosh points out 'the knowledge of Grace in fact destroys the idea of an indirect revelation in nature, history, or in the consciousness of our own existence'. (9) So the true revelation of God involves Him in descending, in bending Himself to our depths. Thus for Barth the concept of Revelation is intrinsically bound up with Creation, Reconciliation and Redemption. Thus it is that every act of God is a triune activity, and on this basis our faith in God demands faith in the Trinity, though Barth is careful to avoid any equation between 'Trinity' and the number 'Three'.

God is, by definition, wholly other, and therefore unknowable. But because it is part of His Being that He is a God of Revelation, so He can be, and is, known through the Word. This 'Word' is for Barth 'primarily and originally that which God speaks by and to Himself in eternal hiddenness'. (10) It is crucial that we understand the Word not as an afterthought of God, but a part of His essential nature; for on this doctrine hangs the whole of Barth's outworking of his theology of Grace and Reconciliation. At this point Barth's words have a strikingly modern ring, since for him the revelation of the Word, while always within Jesus Christ, is not restricted exclusively to the years 1-30a.d.: the Word also comes in the proclamation by the Church of the revelation in Christ. Further to this it may be noticed that the basis of the proclamation by the Church is that revelation of the Word attested to by Holy Scripture. Scripture becomes that authoritative witness to past revelation that brings to life revelation in the proclaimed situation. When Barth uses the phrase 'The Bible is God's Word' he says it must be seen in the sense that God's speaking at a particular time to a particular person is God's act. 'The Bible therefore becomes God's word in this event, and it is to its being in this becoming that the tiny word "is" relates'. (11)

One of Barth's primary concerns is to preserve the primacy and total Subjecthood of God. For this reason he insists that any revelation of God is a reflexion of his Triune nature. In the Incarnation, it is the Triune God who reveals Himself: God the Revealer, God the Revealed, and God the effecter of the Revelation. The content of this revelation is based on what Mackintosh calls 'a love unbeginning and primordial'. (12) And as Barth himself says 'In God Himself this Love is the love of the Father to the Son, of the Son to the Father. This eternal love within God Himself is the Holy Spirit'. (13)

(9) H.R. Mackintosh: Types of Modern Theology (Nisbet 1937) p.278.

(10) Church Dogmatics 1:1; p.218. T & T Clark 1956

(11) Ibid p.124.

(12) Mackintosh op.cit.p.300.

(13) Karl Barth Credo (1935) p.119.

While it is true for Barth that 'God might satisfy his Love all by Himself, for He is already an object to Himself, and an object truly worthy of love', (14) yet it is because of His essential willingness to bend and humble Himself, that his Love moves outward in terms of creation and Grace. Grace, we find, must be the motivation not only of Redemption, but also of Creation. And a glance at Barth's concept of Nothingness should indicate that to include Creation in a doctrine of Grace by no means undermines a doctrine of evil or fall. Nothingness - das Nichtige - is the absolute contradiction of existence, and yet is just as great a reality as is existence itself. It is couched in the form of a series of paradoxes that we are left to handle as best we can. William Nicholls describes it thus: 'He calls the Nihil 'unreal', 'an impossible possibility'. 'Yet he certainly means to affirm the actuality of evil in the strongest possible terms'. (15) This Nothing, or 'The Nihil' if we wish to draw out the connotation with Nihilism and annihilation (16) is in effect the 'shadow-side of God's existence' - the absence of his Grace and of his creative 'Yes'. Again it is 'that from which God separates Himself and in face of which he asserts himself and exerts His positive will'. (17) But it is because man is faced with the possibility of Nothingness that God acts in redemption.

It is in Redemption that for Barth the ultimate paradox of God becomes apparent - 'The question whether in willing to let this happen to Him He has not renounced and lost Himself as God, whether in capitulating to the folly and wickedness of His creature He has not abdicated <sup>from</sup> His Deity (as did the Japanese Emperor in 1945), whether He can really die and be dead? And it is a matter of the answer to this question: that in this humiliation God is supremely God, that in this death He is supremely alive, that He has maintained and revealed His deity in the passion of this man as His eternal Son'. (18) The atonement therefore becomes part affirmation of the deity of God, part revelation that the deity is a humble and gracious one, and part reconciliation through total identification with man's state.

To many of these themes we shall return later, but it should already be apparent that the concept of paradox is visible throughout; so also is the over-riding stress by Barth on the Transcendence and Subjecthood of God; and from his being a God of Revelation hangs the whole weight of the arguments that we shall be considering on the theme 'religion'.

(14): . . . Church Dogmatics 1:1. p.158 .

(15): . . . W. Nicholls Systematic and Philosophical Theology (Pelican 1969). p.136. .

(16): . . . As Hartwell, Cochrane and Nicholls. .

(17): . . . Church Dogmatics 3:3 p.351 .

(18): . . . Ibid 4:1' p.246f.

**CHAPTER ONE : AN ANALYSIS OF BARTH'S CONCEPT OF RELIGION**

**1. Religion as discussed in Der Römerbrief, ch.7.**

**Section A – The Frontier of Religion**

Barth's main purpose in the section of his commentary on Romans 7 entitled 'The Frontier of Religion', is to show religion to be the focus, the apotheosis, of all human activity, which exposes man to the inner contradiction of his existence; God is radically 'on the other side' of the frontier that limits and marks out the human-ness of mankind.

He begins by stating that Grace is obedience (1) – an obedience that is on 'the far side' of man's own activity. Grace is that which brings freedom – and it can be no co-incidence that religion is raised for discussion under the banner of freedom, and is at once set over against the coming of Grace in revelation. Grace comes only as miracle, beginning, creation – all from God's activity – and it is the function of religion to show this to be the case, by exposing the activity of man for what it truly is.

Religion is seen as man's ultimate activity, seen firstly as a parallel to the concept of 'Law', and secondly as a natural extension of human passion. Law is the possibility of religion: in other words, it is only because of the limitations of our humanity that we become creatures under Law, bounded by morality, and so exposed to the inner contradiction of religion. Freedom is only encountered beyond the humanism of religion. Indeed, religion, like law, is effective only until death, and so it represents the very frontier of human activity. So the death of religion opens up a new possibility of life.

The great crisis for religion is that it falls within the brackets of sin. (2) For as a passion it springs from mortality, and therefore can only produce 'fruits unto death'. Yet not only is religion a passion – it is the highest form of human passion, for it reflects man's claim to immortality, his desire to become as a God; and this desire becomes conscious in religion in both experience and event.

Barth then develops the argument to consider the activity of God beyond the frontier of human activity. He discusses the limits of human possibility, and then delineates what is the frontier situation. It is, he says, the freedom of God that makes us what we are not. Only the activity of God can release man from religion's inner contradiction. The boundary of human activity is shattered by the 'eternal Moment' of apprehension' that breaks into man's situation. (3) If we try to describe

(1) Der Römerbrief ET (OUP 1968) p229

(2) Ibid p.236.

(3) Ibid p.237.

or observe this activity, we return again to the world of religion. Indeed Barth uses the strongest possible language to make this point: 'What region of human activity is so <sup>thickly</sup> studded with cemeteries as is the region of Christian apologetics and dogmatics and ethics and sociology?' (4) Christ, as the freedom of God's activity thus becomes the end of the law, and the frontier of religion. In this way the activity is on the side of Grace, not on that of human achievement.

The Frontier of religion is thus the line of death that separates time from eternity, human possibility from divine possibility, and flesh from spirit. The newness of the Spirit stands in radical opposition to the finite, human way of religion. (5) (6).

### Section B – The Meaning of Religion

In his second main section of commentary on Romans 7, Barth begins by saying that Grace is the freedom of God by which men are seized. Once again it is important to notice that religion is being discussed within the context of the Grace of God. We are not dealing with religion in its own right, but only as it is exposed and countered in the movement of God's Grace. It is in religion that the last visible, and the first invisible thing confront each other at the frontier. (7) Grace is not religious experience; in fact it happens on the other side of the abyss – and the experience of it is only void and blankness. Grace as grace happens – it is not experience – and it is something in the first instance to be received.

Barth then asks whether the Law, closely paralleled to religion, can be considered synonymous with 'sin'. The answer – 'God forbid!' (8) Religion is only one possibility among possibilities, but sin is totally inescapable, and lies even over religion itself. But again the crisis of religion is that it cannot be escaped while life lasts, since it is the ultimate outworking of man's being human. It cannot be escaped, and yet its problem is that it indicates that God cannot be found within it. Religion can only bring us to the place where we must wait for God to confront us. Put more simply, man cannot be the centre of his own existence.

The relationship between law and sin is developed by stating that religion makes sin viable as sin. In religion sin becomes observable experience. The reason this is so is that the law is spiritual – and without it sin is only recognised as sin by God himself. Law thus is the structure that defines sin for what it really is in the eyes of God. It is because of this that we may speak of religion as a threat to man. Its distinctiveness is that it threatens man's existence with non-existence; and, Barth

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid p.238.

(6) c.f. Paul Tillich, The Protestant Era (Nisbet 1951) p.192f. The boundary is that point when man's existence is ultimately threatened. This border is possible because man is not identical with his 'vital spirit'.

(7) Der Römerbrief ed. cit. p.240

(8) Ibid.

tells us, the further the tension goes between possibility and impossibility, the deeper into religion we travel.

The relationship between religion and sin is now spelt out further by Barth. Man's problem is his effort to seize for himself God's own position – and it was against this that the prophets cried out. In this way an attempt is made to bring religion under the 'Krisis' of God, and the result is that (since religion is the height of man's activity), religion is seen to place a question mark against the whole realm of human culture. What religion is therefore doing is to define the limits of being human, since it urges me to delineate between myself as finite, and the infinite God. Thus either way, whether by confrontation or by natural delineation, I cannot avoid the ultimate question of God. My inner desire to go to the limits of my humaness pushes me to the edge, to the frontier, and thereby lays bare my sinfulness with the same inevitability that independent action followed presumption in the Garden. Passion and independence become inter-related, and independence is Sin. Religion is the border-country, and in it humanity is drawn into confrontation with God. In this way 'religion becomes the working capital of sin; its fulcrum'. (9)

The argument now moves to consider the nature of existence within the realm of religion. Man lives within the movement from creation to recreation, and only in the context of this movement can he discover the true meaning of life. (10) But the coming of law banishes the eternal 'Now' of creation, and eternity is reduced to time. All becomes concrete and indirect. We are then faced with the inevitability of death, and yet precisely in the 'No' with which death confronts us, we are faced with the possibility of discovering God's 'Yes'. What religion does, therefore, is to take us to the edge of the abyss, since all our efforts to 'know' take us further and further from the possibility of relationship with God. (11) Yet right at the brink, at the frontier with ultimate death, we are suddenly exposed to the possibility of Grace and ultimate life.

The parallel between law and religion is now drawn out further in two ways. Firstly the law is seen to create sin – it is the 'occasion' of it. This is because law gives the impression that time is eternity, and that piety is achievement, which is why in a strict sense we may say that religion arises out of law. Religion becomes a necessity in which the power of law over men is demonstrated clearly. And yet, secondly, the law is holy; how can this be? Our answer can only be in the paradox of further questions. But somehow religion points from humanity to divinity; somehow it is the parable of the divine will; by its indirectness it bears witness to a lost immediacy.

(9) Ibid p.248.

(10) Much of the criticism of Karl Barth as a dualist rests in a misunderstanding of the dynamic involved in this movement. He is surely describing the internal dynamics of a moment of Existenz rather than a temporal progression from one pole to another. This distinction has a major effect on how we understand for example his comments above on 'culture'.

(11) c.f. section below on Dialectical Theology.

Because of this, religion is seen to expose a reluctance in men to actually live on the edge. Most people are unwilling to face the truth of insecurity, of total exposure, and risk; few people are prepared to face the risk of the final ambiguity that religion exposes – the questionableness of all human possibility. (12) And this leads to the final irony of religion, in that God's 'Yes' confronts us in the 'No' by which we are imprisoned. Such is the nature of the paradox with which Barth is struggling. What happens is that the only way open to us to avoid anxiety is to 'obey the law' – which has already shown us that it can offer no escape. In this way the anxiety is increased still further, and once again we are at the frontier tightly encircled by no other thing than the freedom of God himself. (13)

### Section C – The reality of Religion

The third section of commentary on Romans 7 in Der Römerbrief opens, as have the other two, with the affirmation of an aspect of God's activity – here the Divine Mercy is seen to act 'in spite of' sin. For sin celebrates its triumph in religion. Religion states that there is no solution to the riddle of life, and that it is a misfortune to be borne by all, either knowingly or covertly.

The question of the law is taken up again, and its built-in tension is disclosed, since it is in fact spiritual. Man's problem is that he moves from Spirit to death. His potential as Spirit introduces the tension, and the knowledge that the law is spiritual is the first requirement of the religious man. He is called and must obey; God appears in his life as a great boundary-wall – with which he must come to terms and learn to live. This, Barth, says, is why Paul is a prisoner in chains.

The tension of the Spirit-world is rendered more acute by the reality of sin. Paul is 'sold under sin'. Somehow man does not act in accordance with his feelings so Barth cannot with Schleiermacher, tolerate right feeling of the absolute. (14) I do not do what I wish to do – this is the inner tension of every man, and so each statement made is within the ambiguity of needing another to dissolve it. There is an abyss between a man and himself. The problem comes when one ego questions the other, but is unable to survive its own question: this is the reality of sin, the reality of being human, and the very reality that religion exposes in its real light.

The second requirement of the religious man is to recognise the extent of sin – that there is nothing good in man as he stands alone, outside the dynamic of

(12) Der Römerbrief ET p.255

(13) Use of existential language such as 'ambiguity', 'anxiety', shows the area in which Barth is operating, and this continues to be significant, though less explicitly so, in the section in the Church Dogmatics on Religion (c f. section comparing the two pieces).

(14) The issue here is not so much to do with 'feeling' as with the possibility of direct or indirect knowledge of God. c f. section on the influence of the nineteenth century on Barth.

Grace. Even the kingdom of Christ cannot escape the totality of Sin. The holiness and mercy of God have become the personal problem of existence for the truly religious man. He recognises also the conflict between his will and his capacity to act – a further mark of the tension between Spirit and Flesh. All this is religion's witness to the extent of Sin.

There are three things that religion exposes to man. (15) First it exposes itself as man's great enemy. It is disruptive, and spells discord, tension and ambiguity. It exposes man's attempts to build illusions as covers for his real insecurity; and it reflects the inner contradiction and questionableness of the human Ego. Secondly, it exposes in itself the tension, or dualism, between Spirit and Nature. Like a neatly parcelled time-bomb, religion will eventually shatter man into part-nature and part-spirit: man is seen to be imprisoned by his own corporeality, and this is the ultimate tension of his existence. And thirdly, religion exposes in itself the problem of death. It points to the paradox that man can neither live nor die, and this is his ultimate wretchedness – a far cry from the 'conquering-hero' image of nineteenth century man! (16)

All this leads us once again to the activity of God in the face of man's total exposure through religion. Jesus Christ is the new man; he dissolves the man-of-the-world; He becomes a man's new real, existential 'I'; He is what man is not; through Him man becomes what he really is. This is the activity of God in the face of man's religion. But almost as a postscript, Barth insists that Christ in no way gives man a new independence. Far from it! The original 'am' of wretchedness can never be destroyed, since it is born of law, and the law, we have seen, is spiritual. So ever and again, man is thrown back to the edge, to the frontier, by religion, where ever and again he is 'shattered on God', and only then discovers the 'Yes' in the 'No'.

Within the framework of this chapter it is possible to detect both a consistency and a diversity in the use of the word 'religion'. Throughout, it is Barth's contention that Religion is an activity that is basic to man being man. This is because for him it is the ultimate focus of human existence – it's greatest achievement – where that focus incorporates a question mark that is either faced up to or is covered up. This basic meaning comes through in all three sections in this chapter of Der Römerbrief.

But within this main activity of religion, several secondary activities are going on concurrently. It is the natural and inevitable activity of man to claim and assert his independence. Religion is also closely identified with the activity of Law, which in turn is seen as something that is spiritual. Again, religion is defined in terms of the ultimate human passion – the activity of Desire taken to its inevitable conclusion. And it is also seen as the end, the boundary, and the frontier of human possibility. Religion is

(15) Der Römerbrief ET p.266

(16) p. 269.

that which exposes sin as sin, due to the tension it reveals between will and capacity. And finally it exposes the totality of man's sinfulness. All this is because religion is an activity that man wills on himself as part of his own nature: yet it turns against him, and declares him in the end to be an irresolvable contradiction.

Further, as we noted earlier, it is over against all this that Barth places the activity of Grace, that meets man only as he is totally exposed – by Religion – at the boundary of his own possibility. Grace is the priority in his thinking, and religion is looked at in all the different aspects mentioned above in order to highlight the activity of Grace as it comes to man.

## 2. Religion as discussed in Church Dogmatics 1.2 p280-361.

### a) The Problem of Religion in Theology.

In this section of the Church Dogmatics various aspects of Barth's understanding of religion are highlighted. (17) Religion is seen first of all as that condition of man when the priority of God's Grace is lost or denied. Secondly, the section reveals religion to be the ultimate expression of man's anthropocentricity – when he seeks both to be the centre of his own universe, and at the same time to be 'like God'. And thirdly religion is seen to be that which exists in the absence of, or in the place of, Revelation. The problem in history has been reflected in the gradual shift in theology from the priority of Revelation over religion, to revelation becoming subject to the judgement of religion.

### b) Religion as Unbelief.

Barth's intention in this section is to draw out the contrast between religion and revelation, and to show how in the end religion exposes man to the judgement of Revelation. (18) There are two aspects of the doctrine of revelation that throw light on the meaning of religion in this section: firstly, revelation encounters man on the presupposition that all attempts from man's side to know or encounter God are in themselves doomed to failure. If man can know God it is only because God has already disclosed himself to man. That God is always the initiator of the meeting is also the judgement, contained in revelation, that man without God has a meaningless existence. Revelation is thus the 'coming' of 'truth', but in the form of a determinate relationship. And yet the truth comes to us as religious men – as we are. It reaches

(17) For a fuller analysis of this section see below on the historical background to Barth's criticism of religion (Chapter two).

(18) On which compare Barth's treatment of natural theology in Church Dogmatics 2.1.

us in the attempt to know God from our standpoint, and yet it does not reach us in the human activity that corresponds to the revelation; it encounters us in itself alone. The function of religion is to expose to us the impossibility of our own attempts leading to communication with the divine. In this sense alone religion is a positive thing. (19) Religion is unbelief because the divine truth that comes to us in revelation is at once replaced by a concept of God 'arbitrarily and wilfully' evolved by man. In religion man seeks to be active not passive, and hence is unable to receive, and is not open to the gift of Grace. Barth reinforces this point by reference to Calvin, and to the Old and New Testaments. (20) Particularly from the epistle to the Romans, it is argued that unrighteousness does not refer to profanity or secularism, but to loyal worship offered by man to God. And it is this that is expressed, judged, and reconciled in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, revelation is that act by which God reconciles man to Himself in Grace. Reconciliation is needed due to man's inability to give up his claim to his own autonomy. Revelation contradicts religion since in religion the activities of man – piety, asceticism etc. – are more crucial than is the object of those activities. This attempt to achieve justification through a claim to autonomy expresses itself above all in religion; man does not find the justification he seeks through it, since, Barth proclaims, justification is the gift of God, found only in Revelation. (21).

Religion is unbelief in the sense that the law of Grace is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. That justification comes through Jesus Christ rules out the possibility of self-justification, and hence exposes still further the bankruptcy of religion. Barth draws attention to Luther's distinction between a Godly Man, and a Christian, saying that the Christian is distinguished not by what he does, but by what God does. Unbelief always suggests man's faith in himself. This leads to him taking the mystery of his responsibility as a human being as his own mystery and not as God's mystery. This self-faith is no more nor less than religion. And it is for this reason that religion must be termed as 'unbelief'. (22)

Barth now moves into a key area of his discussion of the meaning of the word religion. For while he maintains that the revelation of God represents the only radical challenge to religion, it is nonetheless capable of a critical turn against itself, that is often misleading. Religion is always self-contradictory, yet that contradiction is itself a moment of religion. Religion can never give an answer to the ultimate question-mark that it places over its own existence, since its own existence is reflected in the question mark itself. (23) It thus pushes man to the very limit of his own

(19) c.f. below on comparison between Religion, Law and Flesh.

(20) Church Dogmatics 1:2 pp 303-7

(21) pp 307-9

(22) pp 310-14

(23) pp 314-25

potential, and exposes it as totally inadequate.

Within itself, Barth goes on, religion is questioned both by mysticism and by atheism. Even in these spheres religion is anthropocentric. The two normal modes of religious thinking concern the conception of the deity, and the fulfilment of the law. Both of these are seen to be activities of need-fulfilment. Even the search for truth is seen as satisfying-in-itself, which points to its ultimate non-necessity. This sense of satisfaction is no more than an externalisation of what man already is. This means that religion faces the dilemma of always 'going with the times' and therefore being ineffective, or being permanently out of date by formalising a past insight. Hence religion is permanently sick. It is this sickness that brings about the internal critical turn against itself. The critical turn may make us aware of the falseness of the externalised religion, but it will not enable us to abandon our inner formless conception of God. Only revelation can enable us to see even that as unbelief. So our attempts to liberate ourselves from religion will go on, but they too are themselves the activities of religion. These attempts will be in the form of either mysticism or atheism, both of which still fall into the category of anthropocentric religion. With regard to atheism, Barth concludes 'Thus the result of the critical turn of religion against itself is simply the founding of a new religion, or perhaps even the confirmation of the old'. Revelation therefore is seen to be the only radical challenge to the concept of religion. (24)

### c) True Religion.

This section is more fully analysed elsewhere, (25) but a summary of its direction regarding the meaning of religion is of value at this point. Once again the emphasis is on Grace received being the criterion by which truth is determined. The true Church exists solely in response to Grace, a grace which cannot be dissociated from the person of Jesus Christ. Thus true religion cannot be seen as anything other than radically different from the religion described above, and yet it is intimately bound up with what has gone before. It does indeed take its starting point from beyond the frontier at which man's religion has abandoned him, but it also brings about the abandonment itself, and it comes to meet man in his exposure at the frontier. True religion contains within it the dynamic cycle of Grace which includes the elements of creation, election, redemption and sanctification.

### 3. A Comparison of uses of 'Religion' in Romans 7 and the Church Dogmatics 1.2.

Are then these two pieces of Barth's writing using 'religion' in the same

(24) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p. 323.

(25) cf. section on True Religion.

way? We may note the context of each in relation to their respective works: the chapter in Der Römerbrief has the overall title of 'Freedom' which lies between the chapters in the commentary dealing with Grace, and the Spirit. Barth is therefore looking essentially at God's activity, and he discusses the problems that man faces when he exists outside the spheres of Grace and Freedom. Religion as the height of man's activity is the denial of God's freedom simply in so far as it is an assertion of man's independence – man's idea of freedom – from God.

In the Church Dogmatics, religion is considered in a remarkably parallel context. It comes in the section entitled 'The outpouring of the Holy Spirit', and is sandwiched between a discussion of the freedom of Man for God as a result of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and a section on the 'Life of the Children of God' – in response to the Word. So, in both works religion, with its negative and positive aspects is placed within the discussion of God's activity towards man. And this of course lies at the heart of Barth's entire methodology and inner convictions.

Within this overall similarity of approach, we may isolate several common strands. Firstly, in religion man expresses his desire for independence. In Der Römerbrief this is expressed in the context of man being seen as a passionate animal – his highest passion being to assert his own independence, and to claim for himself the position of God. In religion this passion becomes concrete. In the Church Dogmatics this point is made in terms of revelation being seen to become subordinate to reason, a fact that in its history the Church has failed either to recognise or to counter. Religion is therefore basically anthropocentric, and it is in total opposition to revelation. And in the section on The Abolition of Religion, a similar point is made in terms of religion's taking the mystery of man's responsibility as his own mystery, and not as God's mystery.

A second comparison may be made between the parallel activity of religion and law in Der Römerbrief, and religion being viewed in the Church Dogmatics as the absence of Revelation. The identification of religion with law is not absolute for Barth, but he does use the parallel, in the sense that as the law leads to death, so does religion. Also the law exposes sin to be sin, just as religion exposes to man the limits of his own capacity. And in this sense, as the law is also spiritual (because it exposes sin to be sin), so also the 'reality' of religion is discovered in the 'critical turn' that it makes against itself – which forces man to the frontier, to the Krisis, and so opens the way for man to be encountered by revelation. And so in the Church Dogmatics, religion is seen first negatively as the 'absence of revelation', as 'unbelief' in fact, – and then because of the absence of Revelation it is seen once again as man's activity, as natural, and therefore as moving towards death. Thus the contradiction is apparent between a search for life, and the harsh reality that the search itself is an activity of death. Thus the critical turn is experienced once again, and the question-mark is placed against all human possibility.

This 'inner contradiction' is explicit in both the works, and is again apparent in the 'boundary' language of the section in 'Der Römerbrief' and the discussion of the critical turn that religion makes against itself, in the Church Dogmatics. The impression is that in the Church Dogmatics this is more explicitly worked out in that the inner contradiction of religion shows both its own sickness, and also points to the area where true religion may be discovered. This does not mean that Barth in any way allows for a 'natural' movement from man to God; on the contrary, he is saying that man is driven by inner contradiction to the very edge and frontier of human possibility – where he encounters the great 'No' of judgement; however, in that very 'No', there lurks the hidden 'Yes' of God's freedom and grace.

This 'Yes' is apparent in both the Church Dogmatics, and Der Römerbrief. In the former it is the essence of 'true religion', and in the latter of the 'reality of religion'.

Thus, once due allowance is made between the two works for their differences in style, origin and purpose, there is a strong similarity in the treatment of the concept 'religion' – a similarity that suggests that in the years between the publication of the two works, Barth's thinking had indeed systematised, and developed, but there is still a basic common approach and conclusion. Der Römerbrief was a reaction to a particular crisis, but the true significance for Barth of that crisis is shown in the way the earlier insights lead themselves to such clear and systematic development.

Having established this similarity in the two works, it is important to look a little further at the meaning that Barth invests in the word 'religion'. In the light of the factors which led to the writing of Der Römerbrief – particularly the reaction to the theology of the nineteenth century, and the huge culture-shock brought about by the first world war – Barth uses religion to embrace everything in Christian History that has led away from man's receiving the true revelation of God. In this sense, the nineteenth century had been a time during which the emphasis in theology had shifted from the 'coming' of revelation, to the experience it brought; from 'speaking' to 'hearing'. This leads to the detailed treatment in Chapter 7 of Der Römerbrief of the problem of law and grace. He makes a close parallel between Paul's use of 'law' and his own use of 'religion'. The law was the shackle and the schoolmaster of Judaism, and so also religion is the curse as well as the possibility of Christianity. (26)

This connection between law and religion being apparent, it suggests a historical link with other conflicts in the history of theology. There is a parallel at least, each in their own context of history, between the law and grace conflict in the New Testament; the Augustinian/Pelagian battle in the early centuries of the faith; Luther's opposition to the phenomenon of works; and Barth's understanding of the

(26) c.f. Galatians 3: 24-5, and Der Römerbrief ed.cit. pp 235-7.

opposition between religion and revelation. (27)

In Der Römerbrief particularly, Barth delights in using metaphors to illustrate his understanding of religion. Particularly vivid is the description of religion as the crater left after the shell has exploded – when it is revelation that is itself the explosion. (28) This has the effect of showing the problem of articulating in human terms what is the activity of God. It is clearly a living, dynamic thing, that happens, and all that can be adequately described is what is left afterwards. This same point is taken up later when Barth is describing the problem of man being within the confines of humanity – ‘The religion that we are able to detect in ourselves and in others is that of human possibility, and, as such, it is a most precarious attempt to imitate the flight of a bird’. (29) Once again, it is the moment, the movement of the divine-human encounter, that cannot be quantified or made concrete, without reducing it from revelation to religion.

Barth develops what he means by the ‘moment’, thus: ‘With reference to before and after, the ‘Moment’ is and remains strange and different; it neither has its roots in the past, nor can it be transmitted to the future. The ‘Moment’ does not belong in any casual or temporal or logical sequence: it is always and everywhere wholly new: it is what God – who only is immortal – is and has and does’. (30).

This ‘Moment’ has great theological significance. Another metaphor that Barth uses helps understand what he means. In talking of the Resurrection as both the disclosing, and the discerning, of Jesus as the Christ, he says that ‘in the Resurrection the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world of the flesh, but touches it as a tangent touches a circle, that is, without touching it’. (31) This is the revelation, the moment, and also the paradox, since it is both within time and history, yet in neither. Religion, however is bounded by the closedness of the world order, by mortality, by continuity, and ultimately, by death.

Two other metaphors are of interest in this same connection: Barth talks of religion as the smoke-screen behind which the activity of God is veiled. This is a particularly telling metaphor, since a smoke-screen has a two-fold activity – it is a block that hinders vision of what is happening behind it, but it is also that which allows a necessary activity to take place. Further, the law, or religion, is seen as like a canal bed through which the waters of revelation have ceased to flow. And yet in both cases the very existence of the smoke-screen or the canal bed depends on the accompanying activity to give them any meaning or significance at all.

(27) see below on ‘Religion and Flesh’

(28) Barth – Der Römerbrief E.T. p.29.

(29) Der Römerbrief ed.cit. p.184

(30) Ibid p.112. c.f. M Buber, distinction between I–Thou and I–IT, below.

(31) p.30 (Intro)

Finally Barth contrasts religion and revelation by saying that 'Religion' so far from dissolving men existentially, so far from rolling them out and pressing them against the wall, so far from overwhelming and transforming them, acts upon them like a drug that has been extremely skillfully administered. Instead of counteracting human illusions, it does no more than introduce an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion'. (32) The concept of religion is therefore approached from many different angles, and is highlighted by graphic description to bring out the measure of the problem, and by approaching it from many different positions, Barth manages to find a meaningful form in which to discuss what revelation is, in the face of the evidence of religion.

#### 4. The relation between 'Religion' and 'Flesh'.

It would be a serious omission were we to neglect the fact that so much of Barth's concept of religion is worked out in the context of a commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans. In that epistle, the contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit' is marked, and Barth uses it as a springboard for his discussion about religion. We must therefore ask what is the relation between Paul's understanding of 'flesh', and Barth's concept 'religion'.

Barth defines flesh — Sarx — as 'unqualified, and finally unqualifiable, worldliness': (33) It is a 'worldliness perceived by men and especially religious men; relativity, nothingness, nonsense'. (34) He maintains that the knowledge of sin is in fact a human knowledge, common to all. Indeed, it is the mark of the religious man to know that he is flesh: this is because religion shows him that the spirit is of a different order to his natural humanity. There is in reality a human closed-in-ness, a state of being limited to a single material order. What Barth means becomes more clearly apparent when he refers us back to his comments on Romans 3.20 ('by the deeds of the law shall no man living be justified'): of this he says 'what, indeed, does flesh mean but the complete inadequacy of the creature when he stands before the Creator?' 'Everything that is unrighteous before God?' 'Seen from within the sphere of human fleshliness, the works of the law negate, they do not affirm'. (35) Here flesh only becomes recognisable as such when contrasted with the Spirit. This is used as further evidence for Paul's argument that the law is in fact spiritual. For without 'Law' which is part of the activity of God that exposes flesh as flesh, the 'flesh' retains its pretence of independence and autonomous life. Thus Barth goes on to add 'what men account as righteous and valuable is as such 'flesh' which in God's sight is unrighteous and valueless'. (36) The overall drift of Barth's understanding of 'flesh' in Romans is therefore one of total worldliness, coupled with complete inadequacy before the creator.

(32) Ibid p.236

(33) Romans 7.16, Der Römerbrief ed cit p263.

(34) Ibid

(35) p.89.

(36) Ibid.

It is important to recall at this point in our discussion the fact that Barth's understanding of the Spirit, and of Revelation, is very much a moment by moment 'coming' of the life of God to man in the living present. Failure to bear this in mind would lead us to see Barth as developing a strong form of dualism. To use a not un-Barthian metaphor, he would prefer us to see the spirit as the spark that ignites the petrol and air in the cylinder, rather than as the petrol-vapour itself that has to mix with the air. And again the coming of revelation, grace or spirit is part of a dynamic relation of gift and response, and not something that is static or tied to a time-sequence.

Barth takes the discussion of 'flesh' a stage further in his study of the phrase 'The Word became flesh'. (37) The Incarnation is the crux of the matter. Only through it can the Word unite with the flesh, and that only as it is willed by God himself. Barth's overall concern here is to preserve the utter priority, and overall subject-hood of the Word. For, the Word cannot be understood as object, else it ceases to be the Word. (38) The problem with 'flesh' is that it claims subjecthood for itself, whereas in truth even 'flesh' itself has to be called into being, and can have no substantial existence outside the will of God.

Having established this priority Barth then points out that the significance of 'flesh' in John 1.14 is to indicate that God became true and real man. Of itself, he says, Sarx does not imply a man, a person, but rather human essence and existence – what makes a man a man, not an animal; human-ness, humanitas, and so forth. But, Barth points out, the New Testament concept goes further than that, beyond merely neutral human nature. Sarx implies also the man who is liable to the judgement and condemnation of God. It speaks directly of the man whose existence has become exposed to death because he has sinned against God (by seeking independent existence from God).

Barth is most anxious to express the totality of the Incarnation – and so the complete humility of God. Only the complete identity of God with man in the Incarnation could have brought about the possibility of reconciliation. Flesh therefore, within the formula 'the Word became flesh' carries with it the notion of unredeemed man. And to support this claim that 'flesh' implies fallen man rather than created man, Barth quotes H Bezzel, who in the nineteenth century wrote 'Jesus' becoming man had never redeemed us, only His becoming flesh'. (39)

How far is Barth's understanding of Sarx a realistic one? Professor C.K. Barrett, in his commentary on Romans distinguishes two major uses of Sarx in the

(37) John 1.14 c.f. Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.132 ff for what follows

(38) For this compare section on relation of Barth and Buber below

(39) Quoted in Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.155

Pauline epistles: the first, more easily recognisable, where 'flesh' implies simply the physical aspects of human life. The other sense he defines as that 'having a darker note of proclivity to sin that affects all men'. It is this latter sense that is destroyed, in principle, at baptism. (40). This second understanding would be in broad agreement with the concept of 'flesh' as outlined above in Barth's understanding.

It is useful also in this connection to look at the writings of the reformation period, many of which were of seminal importance to Barth. In his commentary on the epistle to the Galatians, Luther, commenting on Ch 3.3, says 'Flesh is therefore taken for the very righteousness and wisdom of the flesh, and the judgement of reason which seeketh to be justified by the law. Whatsoever then is most excellent in man, the same Paul here calleth 'Flesh', to wit the highest wisdom of reason, and the righteousness of the law itself'. (41). This would suggest something of the idea that Barth has used in Der Römerbrief concerning a total worldliness, and also strikes an interesting chord with Barth's use of the 'ultimate possibility' concept, in relation to religion. In both cases man's ultimate achievements turn against himself, and reveal his bankruptcy without the coming of God.

Perhaps even more significant is Luther commenting on Galatians 4.23: here he states that the child born of the flesh is the one born at the instigation of man alone, without the Word having been spoken. The promise precedes the child of the Spirit, but not that of the flesh. This again is reflected in Barth's phrase 'total worldliness' – where the life of the spirit has no place at all.

Two other references in Luther's commentary are worthy of our attention: the first is his comment on 2.20 – 'and that which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God' – on which Luther says: 'As if he should say: true it is that I live in the flesh, yet this life, whatsoever it is, I esteem as no life ...' (42). By this it is suggested that the life of the flesh, while it continues, must not become, the area of dependence, or the fulcrum of existence – and again we recall Barth's saying that 'flesh' indicates the inadequacy of the creature before the Creator.

The second passage comes in commenting on Galatians 5. 16-17, concerning 'the lusts of the flesh'. Here Luther writes 'it is plain that he speaks ... of the whole dominion (universa politia) of sin ... which strives against the dominion of the spirit'. This clearly links the world of flesh with the reality of sin, and also radically opposes it to the world of Spirit. Here again one cannot help hearing the

(40) C.K. Barrett Epistle to the Romans p.146 ff.

(41) Luther: Commentary on Galatians Edinburgh 1953 p.212

(42) Ibid p.172.

echoes of Luther in Barth's very fundamental stress on the coming of the Word right into the world of Sarx, and of man being bound until the reconciling Word is spoken.

We find a not too dissimilar understanding of 'flesh' in Calvin, who, commenting on Romans 7.18, says 'flesh includes all that human nature is, everything in man, except the sanctification of the Spirit'. (43) 'Flesh' here seems to imply the whole of man's being, not simply the physical limitations of humanity, But Calvin adds in the same paragraph, that 'flesh' can apply equally to the unredeemed part of the soul, 'in the same manner by Spirit he means that part of the Soul which the Spirit of God has so reformed that God's image shines forth in it'. (44). The over-riding emphasis here, then, is the contrast between flesh and Spirit, the one being indicative of the activity of man alone, the other of the life of God. The links with Barth's theological outlook are clear.

We must now consider the relationship between flesh and religion. Religion has been referred to by Barth as being 'basic to man's being man': 'flesh' is termed as the totality of lost humanity, as it is here and now. Religion is 'the frontier and boundary' of human possibility: 'flesh' is the state of 'unqualified worldliness'. Religion is the assertion of human independence, the seizing of responsibility for selfhood: 'flesh' is the inadequacy of the creature before the creator – man's value as 'flesh' is valueless as such before God. Religion exposes sin as sin: 'flesh' refers to the man who is liable to the judgement of God, the man whose existence has become one exposed to death because of sin against God.

The similarity in ideas in the above phrases is readily apparent, but they do not imply a direct relation of identity between the two words. 'Flesh' is primarily an ontological word, indicating a state of being. Religion on the other hand represents a fundamentally human activity. It might be true to say that for Barth religion is the activity of the flesh, but even that is not an adequate distinction. For we have seen already that for Barth there is a strong link between religion and Paul's concept of 'law'. And law in a particular sense, is also Spiritual. So, where religion, because of the critical turn it makes against itself by its very nature, exposes sin to be sin, it too is spiritual. Barth has said that the man of law walks along the very edge of the chasm between 'spirit' and 'flesh' – and so religion, too, in its own particular language, is the 'frontier' between Spirit and Flesh. For the Spirit-world is the world into which the Word has been, and always will be, spoken into by God, releasing the flesh from its life-denying orbit around its own centre.

This distinction being made, however, it has become clear that the New Testament concepts of 'flesh' and 'spirit' are indeed central to Barth's understanding

(43) Calvin: The Epistle to the Romans, p 267 (ET. Cath. Tr. Soc. 1849)

(44) Ibid.

**of religion. His criticism of religion is a mark of that concept being bound to the concept 'flesh', but his call to 'true religion' is likewise the critical pointer to the breaking-in of the Spirit, through the Word. This dual polarity is at the heart of Barth's 'religion'.**

## CHAPTER TWO: THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the main thrust of Barth's analysis of religion so far studied has been biblical and theological, a major section of his analysis in Church Dogmatics 1.2 represents a historical survey of the development of the concept 'religion'. And it is to this historical development that we must now direct our attention.

### a) Barth's Understanding of the problem of Religion in Theology.

One of the difficulties posed by Barth's consideration of the concept of religion is that he develops for the term a peculiar and distinctive meaning which is nowhere bound by a formal definition. We have already noticed its use as a direct contrast to the concept of revelation; (1) as a word of polemic by which to describe all that was for Barth negative in the pattern of 19th century theology: as a mark of the content of man's human aspiration; and yet in contrast, that also which brings man to the very boundaries of human experience and possibility, at which point he may only be met by God in His self-revelation.

There is, however, another aspect to the content invested in the word religion, by Barth. It is certainly present in the points outlined above, but is most clearly seen in Barth's tracing of the concept of religion from the Middle Ages to the present day. For here we find Barth not concerned merely with what individuals wrote and thought in successive generations, but with the very process by which the significance carried by the term gathered momentum. (2) This process becomes in itself a living and dynamic parable of the very concept that is being traced.

Barth's discussion of the meaning of such New Testament terms as 'law', and 'flesh' (3) shows us that his interest is not simply in the history of the word 'religion', but rather in its relative meaning in different ages. It does indeed seem strange that he does not commence his historical study with the use of the word 'religion' in the Bible: for the words Threskeia and Eusebia might have made an interesting comparison in that the former contains the idea of fear, and trembling – which might hint at the frontier to which religion brings man – and the latter is more akin to the human activity involved in piety and reverence, which in turn might reflect Barth's concept of the human activity that is religion. (4)

However, it is our contention that the reason why this is not done, has to do with Barth's desire to restrict his argument to those terms that most accurately

(1) See above – Ch.1.

(2) Barth – Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.280ff

(3) See above - Ch. 1. (4) Paul's understanding of 'law' and 'flesh'.

(4) For these ideas, see below, on the influence of Kierkegaard, and the doctrine of paradox, with its attendant implications for the idea of living "at risk", "at the frontier".

express the living significance of the problem that religion poses for him – in whatever thought or word form was appropriate to a particular age. This is of course fully in keeping with his concept of the presentness of God's revelation, and with his method of interpreting the Word as coming both in the 'years of revelation', and also in the actual and on-going life of the Church.

In what terms then, does Barth talk of the 'living significance' of the problem of 'Religion'? The problem manifests itself. Barth tells us, as soon as we take seriously the concept of revelation. To the question 'how does God come to man in His revelation?' the answer given is that 'both the reality and the possibility of this event are the being and action only of God, and especially of God the Holy Spirit'. (5) This reflects the whole magnitude of Barth's stress on the transcendence and the priority of God over man. The point at issue is whether the coming of God in revelation is dependent upon man's existence as a receiving agent – and the answer given is a categorical 'no' since man's very existence is a result of the creative will of God. So he continues 'Not only the objective but also the subjective element in revelation, not only its actuality but its potentiality, is the being and action of the self-revealing God alone'. (6)

For Barth, however, the fact remains that this activity of God does encounter men. Therefore it must have some form of manifestation that is evidently human. It is in this area, in the place of the human manifestation of the activity of God that the problem of 'religion' for Barth really becomes a problem. But is this manifestation just one among many? What is the relation between the Old and New Testaments, and the sacred writings of all the other religions? Is the norm to be religion, by which we may judge the content of a particular faith, or is the norm to be God's revelation, by which we may judge the degree to which the truth of God may be present in a particular form? Barth's reply here is that 'the revelation of God is actually the presence of God, and therefore the hiddenness of God in the world of human religion'. (7) The implication of this is drawn out by the further statement that <sup>it is</sup> that 'which is divinely unique in something which is humanly only singular'. (8) Thus the revelation of God, whenever and wherever it occurs, remains as the singular Word of God, as His activity and Incarnation, however much hidden its manifestation may be by being also of the genus of a human religious phenomenon.

Barth develops this theme by suggesting that this problem of the relation between the revelation of God in a particular form, and the evident parallels of that form with other areas of purely human experience, is in fact one of whether or not the

(5) Church Dogmatics 1.2.p.280

(6) Ibid

(7) p.282.

(8) Ibid – In other words, what is experienced as human religion may or may not convey genuine theological content, depending on whether God's revelation is invested in it by Himself.

Church is willing to take itself and its bases seriously. Precisely because of the human manifestation of God's revelation in terms of human experience, 'the problem of religion is simply a pointed expression of the problem of man in his encounter and communion with God. It is, therefore, a chance to fall into temptation. Theology and the Church and faith are invited to abandon their theme and object and to become hollow and empty, mere shadows of themselves'. (9)

Barth's thesis now is that modern Protestantism has effectively failed to take itself seriously: it has been happy to see religion as the problem of theology, not one of her problems; it has used religion as the norm by which to interpret the revelation of God, rather than the reverse; it has seen faith as a form of human piety rather than as an act of the judgement and grace of God. (10) Barth says that the historical development of the slide into religion and away from faith represents a fascinating puzzle. But it is more than that, and Barth uses it, surely intentionally, not only as the means of providing a historically valid basis to his argument, but also to illustrate the reality of the dangers against which this whole area of his work is directed. We are being shown a developing historical pattern, and at the same time being warned that this is still the living issue that confronts man in every moment in which the revelation of God is being manifested in human history. It is this two-fold activity included in the whole of his methodology which gives such a cutting-edge to what he has to say.

The initial phase of his historical survey points up the great significance for theology of the Renaissance. Until the emergence of medieval humanism, the concept of religion was restricted almost exclusively within the Christian tradition. Thus Aquinas, Barth tells us, can speak both of the general virtue of religio – in a moral sense – and also of a specifically monkish religio. But this has no thought of the religio being a general thing, of which its Christian manifestation is but one. (11).

Barth then moves to Calvin, and again maintains that he has no concept of religion as a general thing: despite man's being ascribed an inalienable 'semen' of religion, for Calvin this 'receives content and form only as it is equated with Christianity, i.e. as it is taken up into revelation and fashioned by it'. (12) This statement Barth bases on a quotation from Calvin's *Institutes*, in which 'pure and genuine religion' is described as 'confidence in God coupled with serious fear – fear which both includes in it willing reverence and brings along with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed by the law'. (13).

(9) Ibid p.283

(10) p.284.

(11) Ibid

(12) p.285.

(13) Calvin: *Institutes* 1.2:2 ET. SCM. 1960

Barth argues that up to the end of the seventeenth century the position is largely unchanged. He admits that the idea of 'Religion' is increasingly employed, but he maintains that it is always contained within the concept of revelation. While most of the older orthodox theologians do not treat the subject separately, the two early seventeenth century Basel men – Polanus and Wolleb – treat the matter under the head of 'ethics', in the light of a discussion on the right interpretation of the commandments. Barth is at pains to point out that they do not put it at the head of a system of theological principles. However, Barth points to the first warning sign in Wolleb – albeit disguised, and 'rendered innocuous by the context' – in the form of a general definition of religion – 'Religion in its usual understanding denotes every form of the worship of God, more specifically it denotes the immediate form of worship of God, and most specifically it denotes either the internal form of the worship of God, or both the internal and the external together'. (14) The danger warning here seems to be specifically in that Wolleb starts from the general and moves to the particular, rather than the reverse.

A slightly different aspect of this same erosion is evident also in Anton Walaeus, who suggests that religion is recognised as true by the voice of conscience and of nature. Barth allows that this point is made in defence of the authenticity of Scripture, but he asks how long it will remain a purely harmless remark within the context of the priority of revelation.

The next pointer along the road to undermining the concept of revelation, for Barth, comes in the person of A. Heidan midway through the second half of the seventeenth century. Barth suggests that Heidan was in fact trying to bring together into one approach the insights both of Calvin and Descartes. As a theologian he remains firmly within the Calvinistic tradition of revelation, but as a Christian apologist he points in the direction of a natural theology. On the one hand he can say 'Cum deum cogito, concipio ens perfectissimum, numen potentissimum, sapientissimum' ..... (15) and 'ex hac notitia dei ortum habet religio' (16). While this might suggest to us a general concept of religion, Barth notes that the counter influence of Calvin quickly suggests that it is improper to deduce from this that a right reason is the true basis of primitive religion. The general concept is, as Barth puts it, 'only an apologetic interlude'. (17)

A similar reflection of the growing awareness of the tension between religion and revelation is found in M.F. Wendelin. By 1634 he had placed religio in a key place – as the object of theology. Religio becomes the concept at the head of his theological system, and God becomes its 'causa efficiens principalis'. (18) However, such a high valuation of religio is tempered into some measure of theocentricity, since 'the method of knowing and worshipping God is prescribed by God for the well-being

(14) J. Wolleb – Christ. Theol. Comp. 2.4: i.3 (1626) quoted Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.285

(15) A. Heidan – Corp. Theol. Chr. (1676) L. i.p.12: quoted Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.286

(16) Ibid p.13

(17) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.286

(18) M. Wendelin: *Christianae Theologiae* (lib. duo 1634) 1.1. (Amstelodami) quoted Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.286

of men, and the glory of God'. (19). But Barth is sceptical as to the intention of this remark. He suspects that objective language is being used to disguise a subjective understanding of God's revelation.

Quite how we understand this suggestion of Barth's about the danger of a subjective understanding of revelation, is important. We have already seen elsewhere that revelation for Barth involves an encounter between God and man, on the basis of God's coming to man. Such an encounter must by its very nature have an element of both the objective (it is God who comes) and the subjective (man responds to his coming). But in this context Barth's comment on Wendelin's approach must imply that the hidden danger yet to be made explicit must refer to the subjectivity that would use a purely experiential frame of reference by which to assess the content of revelation. This is the reversal of priorities that is Barth's fear, and he backs it up by reference to yet another seventeenth century theologian – F. Burmann. Again the religio is the 'method of knowing and worshipping God' (20), but now the ratio becomes recta ratio, implying that its rightness now comes from a natural justification of some form.

The question of 'Religion' has clearly now become more than a side-issue, but Barth picks out two more theologians to represent the birth of what he calls early eighteenth-century Neo-Protestantism – the pre-cursor in his view to the whole nineteenth century movement. In selecting Salomen van Til (1643–1713) and J. Franz Buddeus (1667 – 1729) Barth is not only showing the development of the argument regarding the gradual emergence of a concept of 'Religion', but he is pinpointing the open and final break with the truth of the Reformation as the movement that he refers to as 'so-called rational orthodoxy' (21) – a movement that sought to draw together the worlds of divine truth and man's rational knowledge of his environment, and to show that the two need not be in direct conflict.

For both these two men, dogmatics is now based on the assumption of an independent and genuinely 'natural' religion. A 'religio in se spectata' is now the presupposition of all religions; the great reversal has now taken place, and the knowledge of God is dependent upon the available resources of a man's reason. As Buddeus puts it 'Ut enim a natura homo habet, quod ratione sit praeditus, ita, quod et deum esse et eundem rite colendum agnoscit, non minus naturae ipsi acceptum ferre debet' (22); as reason is man's natural mode of understanding, so it should also include whatever he understands of God and his worship. The order of priority is now established: first establish the general pattern of religion, or religious truth, and then fit any concept of revelation into that pattern.

(19) Ibid

(20) F. Burmann 'Synopsis Theologiae' (1678) 1.2:1 quoted Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.287

(21) Church Dogmatics 1.2: p.288

(22) J.F. Buddeus Institutiones Theologiae dogmaticae variis observationibus illustratae - Lipsiae 1724 1.1:3 quoted Church Dogmatics 1.2: p.288

But both Buddeus and van Til maintain the need for some concept of revelation. It is seen as a necessary supplement to natural religion, and not as its precursor. Buddeus maintains that the two are complementary, not in conflict, while van Til says that natural religion shows man the need for reconciliation, and its conditions; and it shows the revelation of Christianity to meet those conditions.

Thus Barth has argued his way skilfully to the point at which he can begin to develop his modern theory of a concept 'Religion'. The main drive of his argument has been to indicate the process by which the reversal of priorities between reason and revelation has been achieved. He is careful not to point the finger at any one theologian as the master of all the development, since it is part of his understanding of the concept 'Religion' that it has built into its own structures the seeds of its own destruction. (23) This is further evidence of Barth's method of study being itself illustrative of the point he is trying to develop.

Having established the 'breaking point' in his historical survey, Barth then goes on to paint the picture between the mid-seventeenth century, and the late nineteenth. In particular he refers to the emergence of the Neologians in the middle of the eighteenth century, with the proposition that revelation could not be maintained in the face of reason, and that dogma and scripture must therefore be subjected to severe criticism under the criteria of the 'notiones' of a 'religio naturalis'. But this influence was itself abolished by the emergence of Kantian rationalism, which reduced 'religio naturalis' to an 'ethica naturalis' and allowed revelation only as the actualising of the powers of moral reason.

Thereafter the argument is taken into the nineteenth century, at which it will be necessary to look separately and in rather more detail in order to see more clearly the immediate background to Barth's own thinking, and also what was that fuller picture of 'Religion' that forced him to turn, not only from his predecessors, but also from his own early development and theological understanding.

(23). See page 15 above.

b) **The Distinctive Characteristics of Nineteenth Century  
Theology in relation to Barth's Concept of Religion.**

In order fully to understand Barth's concept of religion it is necessary to go beyond his tracing of the problem of religion in theology from the Middle Ages onwards, and to look rather more closely at some of the developments of the nineteenth century. This in turn entails looking slightly wider than strictly does the excursus in the Church Dogmatics, (1) to the prevailing influences on theological and secular thinking of the time.

Beyond the limits of the strand of Protestant Theology that it has been Barth's concern to study critically, we find the theological scene in general wide open to the criticism of those towards the end of the seventeenth century whose prime motivation was a sceptical rationalism. David Hume's critique of religion delivered a serious blow to the 'conventional' approach to theology of a dispirited form of metaphysics, in which the God of the Copernican Universe was unassailably seated in his heaven, and successfully laid bare the inadequacies of its foundations. The core of his argument against the 'natural' basis to religion concerned the undermining of the 'proofs' for the existence of God. Richard Wollheim highlights Hume's two major points: firstly, 'when we argue from effect to cause, we are never entitled to attribute to the cause any property over and above those it must have in order to produce the effect'; (2) and second 'the only case in which we can validly infer from a particular event to its cause, is where the event is one of a series of events which have been observed to be constantly conjoined with events similar in kind to the cause'. (3) Since the religious hypothesis depends upon such a unique causal situation it must in the end be invalid as a strict argument. (4)

Hume in his turn 'awoke from his slumbers' Immanuel Kant, who took up the cause of moral theology, producing a form of rationalism that was to have a profound effect on the course both of philosophy and of theology from then on. With the rise of scientific knowledge and method, it became clear that it was less and less possible to apply a strict objectivity to theological principles, or to define theological concepts in any of the same categories as used in science.

The growth also of rationalism, as much in theology as in literature, strengthened the belief in the centrality of man's powers of reason: reason was now at the heart of knowledge, and Christian truth could be comprehended and defended

(1) Church Dogmatics 1.2 pp.284-291

(2) R. Wollheim, Hume on Religion p.22 Fontana 1963.

(3) Ibid p.23.

(4) The significance of this point is that the argument of cause and effect can only be maintained in strict logic in relation to the one immediate and visible cause of a given effect. The chain reaction is therefore invalid.

largely through the application of the power of reason. On this basis reason soon took priority over faith as the basis of doctrine: doctrine was now to be assessed on the basis of how well it stood up to reason's prosecution. It is at this point that we see again the relevance of Barth's tracing of the history of the problem of Religion in theology. The great reversal of theological priorities has taken place, and the existence of the divine is now subordinated to its comprehension by the rational categories of the human mind.

We are of course now dealing with the tension between reason and revelation; a tension between an anthropocentric and a theocentric approach to theology; a tension as central to Barth's understanding of religion as it was (for different reasons) to Butler's *Apologia for Christianity*. The latter, entitled 'The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature', and published in 1736 set out to prove to the Deists that both Reason and Revelation are valid sources of knowledge about the Divine. Reason, he says, points to the existence of God, and Revelation to His character. There was for Butler a direct road to God, but it is in direct contrast to this that the thinking of Schleiermacher stands out, and to him we must now turn our attention.

Schleiermacher feels obliged to point out that there can be no connection between reason and faith; they are of a totally different order from each other, and are mutually exclusive. David Jenkins states 'that for Schleiermacher that on which religion is based has nothing to do with what gives rise to science and morality'. (5)

Schleiermacher follows on from the period of the Enlightenment, by stressing not so much the capacity of reason, as of self, and especially of feeling. For Schleiermacher, 'Man's highest task', <sup>it has been said,</sup> is to shape the Self into an individual, and so to say, an artistically satisfying representation of humanity'. (6) It seems as if the core of justification which Schleiermacher falls back on is the correlation of what he thinks to what actually exists in reality. There is more than a hint of the Platonic idea of the ideal and the absolute, for if he commits himself to saying that he knows something, then he is believing that what he thinks does correspond to reality. And this would appear to be Schleiermacher's understanding of faith. He talks of Knowledge and Will as being the two determining factors that lead either to absurdity or to faith. Feeling is what unites knowledge to will, and consequently feeling becomes the lynch-pin of his system. By developing this psychological interest in faith and understanding, Schleiermacher is echoing the cries of the Romantics, championed especially by Goethe : this was in many senses a reaction against rationalism, though as we have seen it also

(5) D. Jenkins *Guide to the Debate about God*, Lutterworth 1965, p.21ff.

(6) H. Mackintosh: *Types of Modern Theology*, Fontana 1964 p.41.

follows out of it with the proverbial swing of the pendulum.

Religion, to Schleiermacher, is 'the feeling of absolute dependence'. (7) With this statement we come to the heart of his problem. On the one hand he is pointing to something that is surely of fundamental truth, that the attitude of the religious man, and his experience of it, is one of dependence, or more strictly of non-independence, and of the givenness of life; but on the other hand, even given that dependence, the theology of feeling is bound to itself by its ego-centricity, and by the limits of its own experience. It rejects the Kantian God of the categorical imperative, yet it talks of the God that is the meaning between knowledge and will, the meaning that justifies the experience. (8)

It is not difficult to criticise Schleiermacher on a number of counts: we might talk of the ego-centricity of his system; of the lack of personality attributed to the Godhead; we might echo those who have felt his theology to be little more than a sophisticated version of Pantheism. Indeed many of these criticisms might be justified were we to take his theology on its own and set it up as a complete and self-sufficient model. But the inadequacies must not be allowed to detract from the importance that his work had for the development of theology in the nineteenth century, and also from the depth of insight into certain areas of religious experience that represent a real step forward.

However Barth may develop his critique of Schleiermacher, we would do well to note first of all that Barth owes much to his recent ancestor, and has more in common with him than may at first sight seem apparent. On the one hand we may note the significance attached by Schleiermacher to the word 'Gelassenheit' which has the meaning of 'yieldedness'. This is central to Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as 'absolute dependence', and seems to owe not a little to his own Moravian background of personal piety. 'Gelassenheit' in conjunction with the immediacy of the concept of dependence at least brings the concept of 'true religion' (as Barth would style it) into the living present. Schleiermacher is as concerned as is Barth (which the latter happily admits at the end of his critique) to avoid the 'dead-letter' of religion, or dogma, and to ensure that the context for 'true religion' is 'dialogue', 'a running battle' and 'a living discussion'. (9)

We must now look carefully at the criticism that Barth levels against Schleiermacher, since it is important for us to grasp how Barth saw the problem of

(7) Schleiermachers Sendschriften über seine Glaubenslehre an Lücke ed. H. Müllert, in Sämtliche Werke 1.2: p636

(8) Schleiermacher maintained that in everyone there is a consciousness of the divine. It is found in the interaction of knowledge and will – the area he assigns to 'feeling'. 'Feeling' in this sense amounts to an awareness of the beyond, and of man's subordination to it, though the 'beyond' only becomes God in the sense of what exists, or is given, within the poles at either side of a vacuum that words cannot define. Schleiermacher can only articulate the 'feeling' or the 'religious consciousness', but that does not mean he sets himself against that which provokes or initiates the awareness.

(9) Barth, Theology and Church, S.C.M. London 1962, p.198-9.

religion developing right through history. And we must remember that in criticising Schleiermacher Barth is also criticising his own early life and thought, which had grown out of a tradition that led directly back to Schleiermacher himself.

Throughout his criticism of Schleiermacher, Barth's main concern is that the absolute 'subjecthood' of God, which was so central to his own thinking, is replaced in Schleiermacher by the absolute 'subjecthood' of man. Religion becomes the reversal of the divine-human order. The opening section of his essay on Schleiermacher (10) is entitled 'The Word and Religion'. The Word is in fact something within the human self-consciousness which reaches out to the infinite in order to interpret the infinite to the finite. But man's spirit needs to be awakened, and this provides the role of the Priest, who 'comes forward to make his own insight an object for the contemplation of others, to lead them into the realm of religion, where he is at home, and so to implant in them his own holy emotions'. Thus from Barth's point of view, however much the striving after the infinite is undertaken, the frontier is never reached, and the possibility of God actually encountering man in this situation is eliminated. What for Barth 'Revelation' through the Word, given form in Christian Doctrine based on Scripture, is for Schleiermacher 'accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech'. (11)

Barth points out that for Schleiermacher the feeling of absolute dependence must be united to the actual consciousness if it is to exist in reality. Therefore the feeling of absolute dependence, and a definite state of mind are in the end inextricable. And if the feeling of absolute dependence represents a co-existence with God, then statements about the self-consciousness actually become statements about God. And so Barth comes to the heart of the matter by quoting Schleiermacher, that 'All attributes which we ascribe to God are to be taken as denoting not something special in God, but only something special in the manner in which the feeling of absolute dependence is to be related to God'. (12)

It appears that the objection Barth is levelling at Schleiermacher is not that he thinks there is no feeling of absolute dependence, and not even that any measure of human subjectivity is ipso facto wrong; but rather that in the process of uniting the self-consciousness to the divine, Schleiermacher is not allowing an independent subjectivity to God, from which position the meeting of God with man may take place. It is a reflection of the seminal nature of Schleiermacher's thought he can on the one hand himself talk of faith being both 'dialogue' and also 'a living discussion', but on the other hand can be open to the criticism of Barth that no real

(10) Ibid p.159.

(11) Ibid p.161.

(12) Section 50, Der Christliche Glaube, E.T. Edinburgh 1928.

encounter takes place between human and divine. Barth finds the wrong direction of Schleiermacher beginning in what he calls the 'principle of the centre'. By this he means the constant effort on Schleiermacher's part to resolve a paradox wherever one appeared, and to seek the truth of the unifying factor behind the paradox. The ideal position, we are told, always lies in the centre of the contradiction. But for Barth, this point can never be reached. (13) The fundamental unity that lies behind Schleiermacher's theology is contrasted with the equally fundamental, and radical dis-unity that for Barth separates man from God. Thus Barth sees the unity concept as being a clear example of religion, reflecting the gradual movement that we have already traced developing out of the Reformation period.

Barth continues his discussion of Schleiermacher by outlining the latter's theologico-scientific principles. He maintains that for Schleiermacher, the object of theology can only be religion, and never God. This is because Schleiermacher declares that God may never be known, but only felt in the Christian Self-consciousness. Feeling in its religious sense becomes not simply either an act of knowing, or of doing, but rather it becomes a centre that actually transcends both. This centre is the state of Absolute Dependence, which represents for Schleiermacher the concept of a relationship with God. While it is hard to deny the logic of Barth's criticism of Schleiermacher's understanding of religion, one cannot escape the observation that Schleiermacher's 'mysterious moment when viewing and feeling unite and are discovered to be precisely one thing' (14) is not as diametrically opposed at its root to Barth's concept of revelation as it clearly is in its flowering. For while the coalescence between viewing and feeling clearly are part of man's activity, they hint at an activity of response to what is already being shown and offered as touch. Barth's distinction between the finite/infinite relation and what he calls Schleiermacher's concept of 'undifferentiatedness' is of great importance, but it must not be allowed to cloud the basic concern of both men in the frontier-situation of the 'mysterious moment'. This is perhaps borne out by Barth's continuing veneration for Schleiermacher, despite the philosophical chasm that finally divides them.

While Schleiermacher has admitted at least to a measure of a concept of revelation (it is that which is creatively the act of individualisation as opposed to the state of being an individual), Hegel finally abandons any attempt to place the divine in any way at all over against the human. Hegel pursued a form of rationalism, quite distinct from the romantic thinking of Schleiermacher, and the main thrust of his argument was that the Spirit of the Infinite can and does arise within the finite

(13): Theology and Church p.165 ff.

(14): Ibid p.172

consciousness. Unlike Platonism, the absolute mind is not other than, but is rather the essence of all finite minds. Thus God is not other, but man has the capacity in his own reason to draw on the reality of the Infinite. What effectively is happening is that man and God (or more correctly the concept of God) have merged into one in a process of reciprocal self-knowledge. God becomes God only as man brings him into being, and man only becomes man as the infinite comes to life in him. This is a march not only along the road to pure humanism, but worse, to a doctrine of the individual that must in the end preclude all human and divine relational life. For as Brunner has pointed out, as God and man gradually merge into one, so man loses his individuality over against his fellows, and the 'Thou' of Relation is lost in the 'I' of experience. (15)

However, rationalism was not to be the dominant way of the nineteenth century. For we find in Albert Ritschl, born in Berlin in 1822, a refutation of the direction of Hegel's thought, and a return to some of the more constructive themes of Schleiermacher. Ritschl carried forward the mainstream of nineteenth century theology that was to issue in the work of Harnack, and so he cannot be overlooked in relation to Barth. Ritschl saw that the subjectivism of Schleiermacher was insufficient to properly be called 'Christian'. It is his contention that we can only understand God as He puts himself within our reach, and in this light Ritschl finds a real place for Christology. He starts objectively from the 'Gospel', and moves then to the 'consciousness': thus the process is one of response, and this represents a real advance on Schleiermacher. However, the response is purely within the moral sphere – the Kingdom of God is seen as 'not the common exercise of worship but organisation of humanity through action inspired by love'. (16)

God thus becomes the moral foundation of the universe, and we might see here, in part at least, a reflection of Immanuel Kant. (17)

The great danger of the moral argument concerning God is brought out clearly by Mackintosh: Ritschl's 'view of religion as such is utilitarian and intramundane. Broadly speaking he argues that religion has emerged as a product of the struggle for existence. As he puts it roundly, and in a fashion that seems more than half unjust to his own deepest convictions, 'religion is the instrument man possesses to free himself from the natural conditions of life'. But we must ask, in a

(15) c.f. Mackintosh op.cit. p.114

(16) A. Ritschl, The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation Vol. 3. p.12. E.T. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1902.

(17) For Kant, according to his moral argument for the existence of God, duty comes to man in the form of a categorical imperative which is no product either of desire or inclination. The imperative is undeniable to human experience, and God is seen as he who draws together the often conflicting areas of virtue and happiness. The point is that the existence of the moral life demands a belief in God, rather than the reverse. (c.f. Richmond, Faith and Philosophy, Hodder 1966, p.39 ff.)

description of this kind, is there anything that radically distinguishes religion from civilisation, which also in its own way is the conquest of nature, the realisation of man's free sway over the world?' (18) Barth is no doubt echoing something of the same criticism when he voices his attack on his theological teachers for their acceptance of the Kaiser's war policy in 1914, (19) which is an attempt to work out how Christian faith acts into, a situation, rather than just responds to it.

Ritschl is probably most to be remembered for his firm call for the removal of metaphysics from theology. This God of moral precepts is to be seen in the context of the human figure of Jesus. At least, this is Ritschl's aim, but one suspects that the personality of Jesus, or indeed of the religious subject, is still subordinate to the moral precept – love being isolated out of personality into what amounts to a non-transcendent metaphysic. What is interesting, however, is his attempt to combine the historical with the moral: Christ is apprehended in believing historical perception. But on the question of moral guilt or sin, the objective element seems no longer to be embraced: reconciliation is man's giving up his distrust of God, on the evidence of History. This again is in clear contradistinction to the bases of Barth's understanding of theology. Ritschl's strength may be in the realm of the psychology of religion – witness his fascinating attempt to relate guilt to a lack of trust – but his weakness must lie in the fact that he creates a moral system that by its very nature denies the life it was intent on creating. Religion is once again limited to the sphere of the human, and the possibility of a living encounter by the subject God by a similarly unifying process as that on which Schleiermacher was engaged.

(18) Mackintosh, *op.cit.* p.148

(19) Barth, The Humanity of God, Collins 1962, p.14

c) Two worlds in collision – the Barth/Harnack Debate.

Our study in the previous two sections of this chapter of the development of the problem of religion as seen by Barth has thrown up two key issues, both of which are brought to a head by Barth's own theological method. The first of these points is his insistence that since the Reformation there has been a gradual but very persistent reversal of the priority of God's activity over man's response. Both His Subjecthood, and the reality of His revelation have taken second place to man's reason, and to a purely anthropocentric world-view.

The second key issue to have emerged concerns the ultimate conflict between a doctrine of Unity, and a doctrine of Paradox. This, we have noticed, emerged particularly in the nineteenth century in the persons of Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard. The former sought always to find the underlying unity behind every paradox, thus opening the way for a genuinely human understanding of the divine: but for the latter, the whole force of the divine/human encounter rested on a fundamental disunity between the two which demanded a dialectical rather than a synthetic understanding.

It was in the light of these issues, and the history of theology out of which they arose, that Barth and Harnack came into direct collision. Harnack had been one of Barth's theological mentors for several years, and this relationship left Barth with a clear and deep understanding of the 'Ritschlian' theological method, and initially a great respect for it. Ritschl had been greatly influenced by the works of Kant: through the influence of Hermann Lotze he had come to see that reason was quite unable to get to the heart of the epistemological problem – and that the speculative and metaphysical approaches to God were no longer of value. This in turn led Ritschl to stress both the moral nature of theology, and also the purely historical nature of the human Jesus in whom could be found 'the archetype of moral personality'. (1) The uniqueness of Jesus' life gave it its significance, since for Ritschl (says Richmond) 'Without Christ's life of perfect obedience and faithfulness the real nature of God would have remained obscure and unknown, and men sunk in ignorance, unbelief, and sin. The work of Jesus is therefore unique and indispensable'. (2)

Ritschl was only one among several influences on Harnack that equipped him, in Barth's eyes at least, as the leading exponent of the whole nineteenth century liberal protestant movement. His deep interest in the historical and literary criticism

(1) Mackintosh : Types of Modern Theology p.162

(2) Richmond : Faith and Philosophy p.83. Hodder 1966.

of the Bible was another key influence. The aim here was to free the Biblical material of its hellenistic accretions and so get back to the purity of the 'historical Jesus'. In his major work entitled What is Christianity?, Harnack points out that the New Testament material aims to be a stimulant to faith in Jesus, and that this is prior to a concept of direct historicity. However, a characteristic picture of the historical Jesus is possible, since the Gospels allow us first a plain picture of Jesus' teaching both in relation to its main features and its individual application; second, they allow us to see how his life issued in service and vocation; and third they give us a description of the impression he made upon his disciples and which they transmitted. (3) It was the systematic and scientific approach to biblical scholarship that was very close to Harnack's heart, and it was to cause him great difficulty in coming to terms with Barth's method as it emerged in Der Römerbrief later on.

The concept 'Religion' took on for Harnack a very positive value, and this added further fuel to the fires of conflict and misunderstanding. Of Christ himself Harnack writes : 'He lived in religion, and it was breath to him in the fear of God ..... his whole life was absorbed in the relation to God .... yet he was not a fanatic'.(4) Despite its somewhat stilted form in translation, this not only shows the association of the word 'religion' in Harnack's mind with the very centre of the Gospel, but it also highlights the contempt that he held for any kind of excess in religious expression – so distancing himself still further from the somewhat polemic style of parts of Der Römerbrief.

A yet more positive value is placed on the word 'religion' by Harnack; it is used to describe the whole life-style of the Christian man, following both the historical and moral precepts mentioned above. Thus he can say 'Religion is not only a state of the heart; it is a deed as well; it is faith active in love, and in the sanctification of life'.(5) Or again, in more rhetorical style we find him stating 'Gentlemen, it is religion, the love of God and neighbour, which gives life a meaning'. (6)

Barth had been a student of Harnack in Berlin in 1906. Two years later Barth moved to Marburg to study under Herfmann. It was there that he began to question his former teacher's methods and conclusions. Through Herfmann Barth was led to reflect deeply on the absolute transcendence of God, and of the 'autopistia' of faith. For Herfmann faith needed no human science on which to rest its case. The metaphysical 'proofs' of God are of no value, since 'a god who is proven to exist is of the world, and a god of the world is an idol'. (7) This represented a

- (3) Harnack: What is Christianity? 1901. ET p.31  
 (4) p.34  
 (5) p.287  
 (6) p.300  
 (7) Conference at Aarau, 1908.

major shift away from the historical/critical approach to theology of Harnack, and it was of crucial significance to the development of Barth's thought. 'Hermann is the one from whom I have learned something most basic', he writes, 'something which, once I followed it to its consequences caused me to see everything in a wholly different way, even to interpret that most basic matter quite differently from him'. (8)

Martin Rumscheidt, in his book Revelation and Theology (9) which is a masterly appraisal of the Barth/Harnack correspondence of 1923, highlights what for him are the key factors in Barth's movement away from Harnack. The concept of 'Autopistia' mentioned above is one, as is the overall influence of Hermann. A second important point to emerge is that it was Barth's actual involvement in the task of preaching, especially to his congregation at Safenwil that made him come to terms with the 'contemporaneity' of the revelation of God. Theology could not be just a working out of the moral and ethical precepts of an historically proved divine-human figure. Rather the Bible had to be seen as the source of a vitally living theology in the present moment. It was from the Blumhardts, Rumscheidt tells us, that Barth gained his understanding of the living God. There was a new discovery of the meaning of faith, over against 'pious security' and ecclesiastical 'busy-ness' (10) which enabled Barth to write (of the Blumhardts) 'The unhappy word 'religion' which contains all the inflexibility of the 'real' world, this word, with which man, tired of life, turns to the distant unknown, was no longer used in Möttingen and Böll'. (11) In the place of religion was a new stress on the freedom and sovereignty of God: it is God that takes the initiative in drawing near to man. The new direction here was not so much in the statement itself, but in the seriousness with which it was taken.

Rumscheidt is surely right in highlighting the Blumhardt's stress on the otherness of God, in his radical severance from the human search after him, as that which once absorbed the developed by Barth, was the final and total break with the theology of Harnack, for whom such bold claims appeared no more than a denial of a doctrine either of God or of man. (12).

It was Barth's publication of Der Römerbrief in 1918 that drew out of Harnack the claim that Barth was a 'despiser of scientific theology'. However, whether he saw this work when it was published, or not until two years later, is an open question. Rumscheidt concludes that it is most likely that he had not seen the work before he heard Barth lecture at the now famous student conference at Aarau in 1920. Barth's lecture stunned Harnack. The latter, writing to Eberhard Vischer, stated that 'the effect of Barth's lecture was just staggering. Not one word, not one sentence, could

(8) Die Theologie und die Kirche, p.241 (1928, Munich)

(9) C.U.P. 1972

(10) Rumscheidt Revelation and Theology CUP 1972 p.7.

(11) Vergangenheit und Zukunft, in Moltmann, Anfänge der Dialektischen Theologie. Vol.1. p.44 ET p.41

(12) Rumscheidt p.10.

I have said or thought'. (13) Such strong words are matched by the extent of the turn-about Barth's thinking represented.

Following Rumscheidt's analysis of the reasons for Harnack's dis-association from the thinking behind Barth's speech, it is interesting to note how closely the points he emphasises relate to Barth's radical re-defining of the concept 'religion'. Let three quotations illustrate the point : firstly, Barth says 'Our quest for God cannot be due to the influence of theology and the Church, for 'theology' and 'church' from the beginning of the world have done more in this respect to narcotise than to stimulate'. (14). Secondly, 'When we admit our knowledge of God, we apparently admit something else besides. When we hold to our partly inside position, we are at the same time apparently establishing a position partly outside. We set up for ourselves a duality, a dualism. We admit our knowledge of God only as an antithesis to other knowledge'. To this we must note Rumscheidt's comment 'is this some kind of Hegelian dialectics, a metaphysics of which theology has most recently and justifiedly rid itself? Harnack has striven endlessly to synthesise the knowledge of the world, of the Universitas litterarum and the knowledge of God. What is this duality, this dualism? Is it not the gnosticism the church had anathematised?' (15). How well he articulates the thoughts that must have been running through Harnack's mind! And then thirdly, he quotes Barth again 'When we ask the Bible what it has to offer, it answers by putting to us the fact of 'election': What we call religion and culture may be available to everyone, but the belief, simple and comprehensive, which is offered in the Bible, is not available to everyone: nor at any time nor in any respect can anyone who will reach out and take it'. (16)

In the first quotation Barth draws out the difference between the work of theology, and God as the object of any theological enquiry. This recalls a comment made later by Barth in the Church Dogmatics (16) — 'the problem of religion is simply a pointed expression of the problem of man in his encounter and communion with God. It is therefore a chance to fall into temptation. Theology and the church and faith are invited to abandon their theme and object and to become hollow and empty, and mere shadows of themselves'. But the point here is clearly not intended to mean what Harnack thought Barth had in mind at Aarau — that theology is a purely speculative activity, without any foundation within the real world. Rather, the quotation from the Church Dogmatics would indicate Barth's concern to highlight the danger of the word form of theology losing the dynamic of the God-man encounter that it is its primary purpose to articulate and explore. Martin Buber makes a similar

(13) Agnes von Zahn-Harnack 'Adolf von Harnack' p.415 Berlin 1936

(14) Rumscheidt p.16.

(15) p. 16 — 17.

(16) Church Dogmatics 1.2. p.283

point in his book Eclipse of God, when he writes 'Symbols of God come into being, some which allow themselves to be fixed in lasting visibility even in earthly material, and some which tolerate no other sanctuary than that of the soul. Symbols supplement one another, they merge, they are set before the community of believers in plastic or theological forms. And God, so we may surmise, does not despise all these similarly and necessarily untrue images, but rather suffers that one look at Him through them. Yet they always quickly desire to be more than they are, more than signs and pointers towards Him. It finally happens ever again that they swell themselves up and obstruct the way to Him, and He removes Himself from them. Then comes round the hour of the philosopher, who rejects both the image and the God which it symbolises'. (17)

The point of Barth's remarks about election quoted above make a similar point. They are concerned to make it clear that scientific theology cannot in any way guarantee, by right of its being scientific, any direct correlation with the knowledge of God. The concept of election in this context once again is an attempt to preserve in tact for theology, the absolute sovereignty of God. He acts as He wills, and reveals himself only as He wills. And this again is why, as we quoted Barth above, 'we admit our knowledge of God only as an anti-thesis to other knowledge'.

Partly because of the commitment of Harnack to the scientific-theological school, and partly because of the enormity of the reversal that Barth's thinking was to entail, Harnack failed completely to see the positive content in Barth's position either at Aarau, or in Der Römerbrief. Thus it was that Harnack felt compelled to write his open letter containing the fifteen questions to Barth, addressed to 'the despisers of scientific theology'. In the questions, and the answers given them by Barth, we find several further clues to Barth's understand<sup>ing</sup> of religion, and also of 'true religion'.

Harnack's first question raises the issue of whether the Bible can be properly understood without the use of science and history. Barth's reply is important since it makes it clear that he is not 'a despiser of scientific theology', but that for him the science must only be a tool in the task of understanding the nature of God's revelation of Himself to men. Historical criticism can only tell us about the God-man relationship, whereas revelation takes place within that relationship. And Barth's answer to the second question again stresses that objective knowledge is secondary to the faith relationship. With these answers we are right at the heart of Barth's concept of true religion, and again the parallel between his thinking and Martin Buber's distinction between the relationships I-Thou and I-It is of great

significance. The 'knowledge' contained in the latter is not wrong or false in itself, but it is only of value insofar as it serves the dynamic relation I–Thou. So it is with faith, and objective scientific knowledge of the Bible.

Harnack's fourth to seventh questions concern the opposition of the human and divine worlds, and they illustrate Harnack's problem in dealing with the dialectic method. He was here up against a solid wall of sheer incomprehension, and as Barth points out in one of his replies to Harnack: 'Is it not pointless and annoying to pose further riddles to you now, and more than likely to most of the readers of Christliche Welt?' (18) Barth had clearly recognised the gulf in the method that divided him from his former teacher, but Harnack could see only the gnostic and other-worldly tendencies of Barth's language when understood outside the milieu in which it was conceived. Barth's answer to the seventh question makes two important points: first statements about God derived from science or culture may have value as expressions of particular experiences of God, but in themselves they are a far cry from statements about God. Mere concepts, in other words, can never in themselves contain the revelation of God, which is always a dynamic and relationship-centred activity. And secondly, such so-called 'religious' statements may protect against atheism, as Harnack suggests, but may also actually sow atheism: this is the potential work of religion as opposed to revelation. Thus what in Harnack's world is the theological defence against atheism becomes for Barth that which leads directly to it, and that which for Harnack leads to atheism – the 'otherness' of God in His total remoteness from man – is for Barth the very key which allows God to act with saving grace towards man. This well illustrates the heart of the Barth-Harnack debate.

One final thread from the fifteen questions that relates to Barth's understanding of religion appears in the fourteenth question, in which Harnack has asked how Barth can avoid, if he spurns scientific and critical scholarship, putting a purely imaginary Christ at the heart of the Christian faith. Barth replies 'Whoever does not yet know (and this applies to all of us) that we no longer know Christ according to the flesh, should let the critical study of the Bible tell him so. The more radically he is frightened the better it is for him, and the matter involved. This might turn out to be the service that 'historical knowledge' can render to the actual task of theology'. (19) This recalls Barth's description of Religion in the Church Dogmatics (20) as 'unbelief', in which he identifies the critical self-turn that religion makes against itself – which in turn brings man to the frontier of what he here calls 'God-awakened faith'. Thus scientific theology, like religious language, becomes like religion itself the mere crater after the shell has exploded, and the smoke-screen indicating where the activity of God might be encountered.

(18) Rumscheidt p.40

(19) p.35.

(20) Church Dogmatics 1:2 p 297 ff.

The debate between the two men is analysed by Rumscheidt fully and carefully. It is not necessary for our purpose to trace all of his argument, which goes wider than the sphere of our enquiry. However, it is interesting and relevant to note the comparison between the description of Harnack's scientific method, and the discussion of Barth's objections to scientific theology. (21) Rumscheidt outlines Harnack's method thus : 1) the wisdom of the historian, and his experience of life illuminated by study; 2) a systematic study of the sources; 3) a study of the cultural and environmental factors; 4) the careful identification of the spirit of the epoch under scrutiny; 5) an assessment of the meaning of the material for that age; 6) an assessment of how the positive values of that age can be enhanced now. The purpose of the process 'must be to assist the striving of history itself towards the life of the spirit, the life of superiority over matter. This striving is the essence of religion'. (22)

Over against this we find Barth's objections to the scientific method. He is not concerned to reject it altogether, but rather to consider its implications, and assess the direction in which it leads its followers. Perhaps in his mind is Kierkegaard's remark which he quotes elsewhere (23) 'Spirit is the denial of immediacy. If Christ be very God, he must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol'. Barth's fear of the scientific approach on its own is that it will claim for itself direct knowledge of God – and that claim is 'religion'. Barth posits four main objections to the method: 1) Reliable knowledge of Christ can only be on the basis of a God-awakened faith; 2) Theology and preaching are concerned with the reception and transmission of the Word of Christ. This does not so much rule out the value of scientific theology, as it gives it a new interpretation; 3) Theology is the witness to Revelation – 'the gospel is not a thing, an object, knowledge of which is derived in the objectivist manner attempted by the positivists in science or history. One cannot take up a merely analytic attitude to the gospel in the belief that one can understand it in this way. Theology is concerned with 'an object which once was subject, and which it must become again and again' if we are to know it as it really is' (24); 4) Theology is a science which operates from within its object. 'Its knowledge of the object to be known is in fact the presupposition on the basis of which it proceeds to ask its relevant questions'. (25)

The contrasts in the two approaches are readily apparent. In Rumscheidt's first point about Harnack the emphasis is on the wisdom of the historian, whereas for Barth the stress falls on the concept of a God-awakened faith. Harnack's method then lays great importance on the historical person of Christ, to the apparent neglect

(21) Rumscheidt p.105f and 122f.

(22) p. 106

(23) Der Römerbrief (1.16).ET p38.

(24) Rumscheidt p.123

(25) *Ibid.*

of the contemporaneity of the revelation of God on which the second of Barth's objections rests. Barth's third objection reflects something again at the heart of his own thinking – that the revelation of God is a dynamic event, and not a static and readily definable concept. There is a dynamic relationship between history and the present, between objective fact and subjective experience. It is interesting to note that Harnack is not so far from a similar position when his method is taken as a whole, and it is possible that Barth overlooks this in his eagerness to define the areas that divide them. But Barth would want to tell us at this point that the dynamic involved was not merely the interaction of the historian's mind with the material before him, but is rather the very revelation, the 'coming' of God to man.

We should note also that Barth's stating of his concern that theology is concerned with 'an object which once was subject, and which it must become again and again', recalls us again to the insights provided by Martin Buber's categories of I–You and I–It. Buber writes "The individual You must become an It when the event of relation has run its course. The Individual It can become a You by entering into the event of relation". (26) The parallel between the 'object which once was subject' and the 'you' which must become an 'it', stands out as reflecting a similar truth, if from within a different tradition. Such thinking would have been almost impossible for Harnack to grasp, since it undermined the very objective categories on which his theological thinking was based.

The fourth objection highlighted by Rumscheidt in the correspondence concerns the very nature of theology. For Barth, as he illustrates in his Fides Quaerens Intellectum, theology is a thinking through in the light of faith, a response from within a relationship. For Harnack, as the above method has made clear, it was a science, and an activity of the human reason. It led to God, rather than issued from God. This highlights the gulf between our two protagonists, and indicates the communication problem that existed between their two minds. It was for this reason that Harnack's method represented 'religion', and excluded from it the possibility of the revelation of God.

It would be wrong to give the impression that we think that Harnack was avoiding, by his method, any concept of revelation, or present experience of God. This is clearly not the case. Rumscheidt reminds us (27) that Harnack talks of 'the inner content of eternal matter'. However, Barth is at pains to point out that 'no mental apprehension of this truth, however subtle, can replace or obscure, the real transcendence of this content'. What Barth is doing is to accuse Harnack of

(26) Buber *I and Thou*, (Tr. Kaufmann) T T Clark p84

(27) Rumscheidt p.140.

identifying the experience with the content itself, and of making what is witnessed to co-incide with what is in fact witness.

This throws up another central *difference* between the two men which reflects an aspect of the concept of religion. Rumscheidt concludes (28) : 'It would seem to me that here Barth is denying that human historical-cognition can grasp God in the human-historical person of Jesus because the very humanity of God is as much a matter of faith as is his divinity'. He maintains this to be Barth's meaning, since this is scandalous, and yet any attempt to avoid the scandal is to allow direct knowledge to replace the paradox. Thus once again the issue is seen to turn upon the question of dialectical theology.

Barth is not trying to sever faith from the human arena, but simply to dispute their direct continuity, as Harnack would try to maintain. Harnack's description of faith in terms of an inner openness does not do justice for Barth to the other side of the coin, to the objective content of what the faith is rooted in. Precisely because we cannot speak of God, we are enabled to understand that in the Incarnation God is genuinely breaking into the human situation, and he is encountering us. Rumscheidt's conclusion of the matter represents a strong defence of the dialectical, and more particularly the dialogical methods, both of which we shall return to later in our study.

There was a certain inevitability in the non-resolution of the issues lying between Barth and Harnack. The radical differences in their theological ancestors meant that neither was really able to do justice to the positive insights of each other. But the real value of the debate for our purposes has been to highlight some of the issues contained within Barth's concept of religion. But the final issue turns not on a particular methodology, or a set of words or concepts by which to define an experience or a direction of thought, but rather on whether or not the God-man encounter is experienced in the context of a dynamic relationship or merely a static observation.

(28) Rumscheidt p.141.

### CHAPTER THREE : THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BARTH'S METHODOLOGY FOR THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Barth's methodology has always been seen to illustrate the material he is discussing. We need to look carefully therefore at the method he uses in discussing the concept of Religion, and to highlight some of the influences that are brought to bear on his writing, and more particularly, his thinking. This leads us to look first at Barth's use of the dialectic method, and then at the influence of Kierkegaard in particular.

#### a) Barth's Use of the Dialectic Method

The development of Barth's dialectical method of thinking is closely bound up with his reaction against the nineteenth century theology reflected in Harnack. But it must not be separated from the more positive influences on the early Barth – the theology of the New Testament, Calvin and Kierkegaard. We have already noted that Barth was struck with the fact that the Bible spoke, not of man's religious direction towards God, but rather of God's self-humiliation in the direction of man-kind. (1) This he found to be in complete contradiction to the theology of his day. The Bible spoke of the dynamic of God's life, but the problem was how to prevent even the words of Scripture from becoming mere words in themselves, and not transmitters of the real revelation of God.

That on the one hand; but on the other, how was Barth to speak to the theological world of his day with sufficient clarity to point out the crisis into which their thinking had led them? Indeed the word 'crisis' became of special significance to Barth, to the extent that 'Crisis theology' became an accepted alternative to the phrase 'dialectical theology'. The significance of the word 'Crisis' is summarised by Richmond under three headings: first as indicating the critical point in an illness – the sickness of nineteenth century romantic and idealistic theology; second as referring to the critical times that this movement had led Christian theology into, as witnessed to especially by the ready assent given by so many Christian leaders to the Kaiser's war policy in 1914; and third (most significantly) to the judgement (Krisis) of God upon all things human, be they moral, philosophical or theological. (2) But again, how could Barth rightly and properly talk of the judgement of God, without his very talking of it reducing it to a mere extension of the human intellectual process of self-criticism ?

(1) H. Hartwell, *op.cit.* p.8

(2) Dictionary of Christian Theology Richardson, S.C.M. 1969 p.81

It would appear that we can isolate four problems to which the dialectic method emerges for Barth as that which speaks with greatest clarity. Firstly there is the question of the maintenance of the total subjecthood of God. For Barth, unless God remains always subject, always the initiator, he ceases to be God: and yet God must still come to man as an Object of his faith and understanding. Secondly, emerging out of this, just how is it possible for man actually to speak of God not as an object only, but also as a subject? Thirdly, the dialectic method speaks to the problem of exposing the dynamic nature of faith, as something that happens here and now, and as an activity that allows the Revelation of God to continue its activity of 'becoming'. And fourthly, there is the problem of how to speak radically to the human situation, rather than simply reflecting to it, with its own tools, what it is in the process of achieving.

Barth is compelled to speak of the 'indissoluble subjecthood' of God, in order to preserve, or rather to restore, a right direction in the understanding of a doctrine of God. In order to 'let God be God', it is necessary to free Him from any sense of being bound by human thought forms, or the categories of perceptual knowledge. Man can only know God, therefore, because God first knows man, and chooses to reveal Himself to him. 'Communion with God means for man, strictly and exclusively, communion with Him who reveals Himself, who is subject in His Revelation, and indissolubly Subject at that'. (3) God's Subjecthood is therefore rather of the kind that throws a bracket round the objectivity of other things: man is indeed still his own subject, but only in the sense of his also being the object of God's Subjecthood. We can always go behind man's subjecthood to see him as the object of God's Subjecthood, but behind God's Subjecthood we cannot go. For the doctrine of the Trinity, for Barth, implies that God is both His own Subject and His own Object: He is both Subject and Object in relation, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, 'and therein lies the possibility of the Divine Subject making Himself Object to man's faith in the life of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man'. (4)

Brown points out that in Barth's stress on the subjecthood of God, he includes both a grammatical and an epistemological sense in the word 'Subject'. God is Subject: this implies on the one hand that God is the active agent in a particular event, and on the other hand that the term 'subject' refers to that pole in the subject-object relation that is basic to knowledge of any kind, in which the object is inert in the relation of being known. (5) The importance of this distinction is to show that while God is the author of the faith by which man can believe in God, the actual

(3) Church Dogmatics 1:1 p.439

(4) James Brown : Subject and Object in Modern Theology S.C.M. 1955 p.141

(5) Ibid: pp. 144-45

activity of believing is genuinely man's. Thus 'God steps over against the human subject as Object in His Word, and makes the human subject capable of access to Himself, and able to contemplate and comprehend Himself as Object through His Holy Spirit. But it is God in His relation to man, and at the same time in His distinction from man, with which real knowledge of God has to do'.<sup>(6)</sup> The essence of the dialectic is apparent in this last quotation. God is indeed utterly distinct from man, and yet He is totally committed in relation to man. Man can only know God as He becomes aware of the enormous gulf that divides him from God, and recognises that he is incapable of doing anything about it. It is then that the gift of faith becomes operative, and God is known in His activity of coming to meet man. It is this accent on the total priority, the utter sovereignty of God that marks Barth out from his contemporaries. Here we notice too the significance of the term 'crisis' for the dialectic method: for the 'Krisis' is the judgement of God, which is expressed in his subjecthood by the fact that were it not for his creative and redemptive initiative, man would fall back from Being into Nothingness. For Barth the essence of man's Being is that it is given him by God; man does not possess it of his own account. This is why the dialectic method has often been accused of being entirely negative regarding its concept of man, stressing only the enormity of the gulf between Creator and creature. The essence of dialectic, however, in this context, is to indicate that only through this radical 'diastasis' can the positive side of God's nature be seen and understood.

The second problem we indicated concerns the way in which it is possible for man to speak of God as Subject. Ever since the Age of Reason, which effectively began with Descartes and ended with Kant, philosophical theology had been concerned with God as an Object. The Cartesian epistemological structure of Subject-Object dictated that man could only speak of God as an Object, and demanded that He be fitted in to the system as a regulator or designer. Richmond points out that Barth's assertion of God's subjectivity is particularly relevant as an alternative both to this rationalism, and to the criticism made of it by Hume and Kant: for these latter two set out to destroy the possibility of knowing God in this Objective kind of way. For, 'if God is Subject, the denial that an Object-God's existence is proveable is irrelevant. For Barth God is not essentially the existing one; He is always and essentially the coming one; since Revelation is an integral part of his Being as such He cannot possibly be the object of man's science, intellection or quest'.<sup>(7)</sup> Given this essential understanding that God's Subjecthood involves His coming, the dialectical implication of this again asserts that man is incapable of coming to God. In the first place man can only be met by God, and be given through His grace the capacity to know God by faith to be objectively Subject. So the paradox remains: man can only know God because he cannot know God;

(6) Church Dogmatics 2.1 p.8/9.

(7) James Richmond Faith and Philosophy (Hodder 1966) p.139.

man's inability to know God is dealt with in God's activity of coming to meet man.

In the third place, the dialectic method seeks to expose the dynamic nature of faith. The great danger that faces faith is that it can easily be reduced from faith to knowledge. This is another way of saying that it is a very thin line dividing true faith as received from God, from a reversal of the process that once again makes God merely the object of men's knowledge. We have already noted that for Barth knowledge of God involves His continual coming: this must of its very nature be dynamic and not static. God's coming in His Revelation. Gogarten has pointed out, in his attack on Romantic Theology, that Revelation is caught in the web of the subject-object dilemma. Revelation, to be such, must have God as its Subject, but to be understood by man must also be object, in the sense discussed above. He says the danger for theology is that either it makes revelation an object – which it must do – or else it forgets that it has done so. It then begins to think about what it has made revelation into, not about the revelation itself. 'It is a confusion, by the way, which infiltrates not only theology, but influences everyone who not only relates himself to revelation in belief (that is allows it to be the subject), but also thinks about it, makes it an object. And who then does not repeatedly fall from the posture of belief to the posture of thought and knowledge?'<sup>(8)</sup> On this point Barth would have substantially agreed with Gogarten, and it is to this problem that the dialectic method speaks: for it is in the tension between opposites that the truth lies, not in the wholesale association with either one pole or the other. Only the poles may be articulated, and into the silence in between the Word of revelation is spoken.

Fourthly, the intention of the dialectic method is to enable the theologian to speak radically to his contemporary situation. Barth, after the 1914 exposé of his contemporaries' attitudes to the war situation, was convinced that only God's revelation could provide any adequate basis for moral and ethical decisions. The direction of the optimism of the age had now become only too plain, and this served to sharpen the cleavage between man and God. Again we see the relevance of the concept 'krisis' in indicating the bankruptcy of human aspiration when confronted with the reality of God Himself. Only a radical 'non sequiter' between man and God could enable God to break in, after the 'NO' of judgement with the 'YES' of reconciliation and Grace. The problem of ethics is then taken out of the court of logical calculus, and is placed the more firmly in the dynamic context of responsive obedience.

We now turn to consider the manner in which the dialectic method conducts itself. Barth speaks of the importance of holding both sides of the dialectic tension

(8) The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology Ed. Robinson (Jn. Knox press 1968) p.319.

together. The positive idea of God must be maintained alongside the critical appraisal of all things human.<sup>(9)</sup> Both of these relate to the living truth 'which cannot be named but lies between them in the middle and which gives to both the affirmed and the negated their meaning and significance'.<sup>(10)</sup> For Barth this living centre is the oneness of God and Man in Jesus Christ. This centre cannot be explained or analysed, but can only be witnessed to by a process of affirmation and negation. In fact, 'the true dialectician knows that this centre cannot be apprehended or beheld, so that he will be drawn into giving direct information about it as little as possible, knowing that all such information, be it positive or negative, is not information about it at all, but always either dogma or criticism'.<sup>(11)</sup>

At this stage it becomes clear that the dialectical method owes much to the concept of paradox as developed by Kierkegaard. His influence on Barth is of such significance that he will be considered separately, but suffice it for the present to indicate that the thrust of paradox, and of dialectic, is to move away from the process of direct forms of knowledge, to a process of mystery, of exposure and of encounter. And when faced with the question as to how can the ambiguity of the dialectic genuinely carry meaning and bear witness, Rumscheidt is right in stating that the dialectician has to admit that he is unable himself to speak meaningfully of the centre – 'God speaks not as a part of the dialectical process, but when it breaks off. The method cannot bring about the event on which it is based and to which it points'.<sup>(12)</sup> Once again we are back in the realm of God's activity in His revelation.

Two other aspects of the dialectic method must be mentioned. The first we have already touched on above – namely Barth's use of the 'No' and the 'Yes'. Torrance says that 'only if we insist rigorously that God is not the creature and the creature is not God, will it be possible in this 'No' really to acknowledge the creature as God's own creation, and really to acknowledge God as God, and as the source and goal even of the thoughts which man in the darkness of his culture or lack of it is wont to form about God, for underneath and above this 'No' that derives from God's revelation there is the divine 'Yes' which we hear in the Word of justification'.<sup>(13)</sup> The central idea therefore is that we can only speak positively about God as we speak negatively about man, and further that only as we speak negatively about man, have we any hope of being able to speak positively about him also. And so far as the dialectic is concerned, it is not valid to speak of either the 'Yes' or the 'No', but only of them both together.

(9) Barth: Word of God and Word of Man, E.T. London 1928 p.206

(10) Rumscheidt Revelation and Theology (Cambridge 1972) p.158

(11) Barth: loc.cit. The whole process of dialectic, therefore set out to allow its centre to retain an existence quite independent of, and unrestricted by, the defined opposites by which it is surrounded; where one side or the other seeks restraint upon the centre, the centre dissolves, and the dialectic as such ceases to exist.

(12) Rumscheidt op.cit. p.159.

(13) T.F. Torrance: Introduction to Barth's Early Theology S.C.M. 1962 p.82

The second point is this: Dialectical thinking may be the method by which we can interpret the revelation of God; but it never is, and never can be, that revelation itself. Part of its own method is to subject itself to the same criticism and questioning to which revelation subjects all things human. 'If we claim to have too perfect an understanding of the Gospel, we at once lose our understanding. In our exposition we cannot claim to be wholly right over against others, or we are at once in the wrong'. (14) Dialectical theology implies no finality in its statements. It demands only that they be 'open' to the truth. In dialectic 'there is a stating of essentially incomplete ideas and propositions among which every answer is also again a question'. (15) This capacity of the method to lay itself open to questioning by revelation in its very attempt to describe it enables it to be of particular service in the attempt by theology to speak meaningfully of God. The method also acts as a reminder that the task of theology is one that takes place within faith, and stands always under the judgement of the Truth it seeks to illumine.

It will be clearly apparent from what we have said, that the criticism of Religion worked out by Barth is firmly set within the dialectical method. The actual title of the chapter in the Church Dogmatics on Religion suggests it with the paradox of the double sense of 'Aufhebung', as both the 'abolition' and the 'exaltation' of religion by Revelation. (16) The activity of revelation is seen first negatively, and then through that negative as also positive. It is evident also in the critical turn that religion makes against itself by its own inner contradiction of itself; and also in the contrast between religion as unbelief, and the concept of true religion that is based solely upon Grace received. And religion drives man to the frontier and limit of his own possibility, the frontier at which he is met and encountered by God in His revelation: and so we have seen above that the Word of revelation comes only when the actual method of dialectic has reached the limit of its possibility also; otherwise it too, is a facet of that same religion that is unbelief.

(14): Church Dogmatics 2.1 p.635

(15): Barth : Theology and Church, p.299-300

(16): c.f. H. Hartwell: The Theology of Karl Barth Duckworth 1964 p.87-8

**b) The relevance of the thought of Kierkegaard to Barth's criticism of Religion.**

In our consideration of Barth's use of the dialectical method in relation to his criticism of religion, we noticed the importance of the concept of paradox to the dialectical method. The great 'theologian of Paradox' was Søren Kierkegaard, who was born in Copenhagen in 1813, and undoubtedly had a very considerable influence on the development of Barth's theological method. In order to understand Barth, therefore, it is necessary to look at Kierkegaard, and to see precisely in what his influence consisted.

While it is true that there is a general connection between the development of any great mind and the circumstances in which the thinker finds himself, there is undoubtedly a very strong and inseparable bond between the theology of Kierkegaard and the very tragic circumstances in which he lived out his existence. The guilty secret of his father, only confessed on his death-bed, haunted Kierkegaard, and turned him into a solitary penitent. The impact of this confession drove the young man, oppressed with an over-riding sense of guilt, to give, as Mackintosh says 'all his powers to the defence of Christianity in what he felt to be a virtually pagan world'. (1) This guilt may have contributed to the breakdown of his engagement to Regine Olsen in 1844, which drove him even further into himself in the ensuing years, despite his continuing and undying devotion to the lady concerned. The tension between love and guilt made Kierkegaard particularly aware of his inner life, and it was through his willingness to battle the issues out that he began to discover new meaning and new possibility within the context of suffering.

This subjective involvement with himself led to his developing a doctrine of Truth as Subjectivity. Here personal experience had interacted with a fierce disillusionment with the objective rationalism of Hegel. The essence of Christianity concerns a deep spiritual inwardness, and this was to form the basis of his devastating attack on the so-called 'Piety' of the Danish National Church. Kierkegaard maintains 'that the Socratic secret, which must be preserved in Christianity, unless the latter is to be an infinite backward step, and which in Christianity receives an intensification, by means of a more profound inwardness which make it infinite, is that the movement of the spirit is inward, that the truth is the subject's transformation within himself'. (2) The point here is the total involvement of the subject in the search for truth. This leads to the main tenet that 'only the truth that edifies is truth for thee' – in other

(1) Mackintosh: *Types of Modern Theology*, ed.cit. p.222

(2) Kierkegaard: *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* Ed. Lowrie OUP 1941. p.37

words, truth is subjective in the sense that it cannot be known of and for itself outside the context of the knowing subject. The purpose of this argument is not to maintain the primacy of individualistic subjectivism that denies real existence to the outside world: it is rather an attempt to state the redundancy of dispassionate thinking about God and existence. It is here that we begin to see the significance of Kierkegaard for Barth's thinking about the Word, and about religion. This dispassionate calculation that angered Kierkegaard so much was very strongly evident in the attitudes of the Danish church; and similarly it was the closed rationalism of Hegel's 'system' that appeared so bankrupt to one whose discovery of faith was only in the context of struggle, suffering and total involvement.

A second area of relevance to Barth's theology is Kierkegaard's doctrine of the contemporaneousness of Christ. In Training in Christianity, Kierkegaard, in discussing Jesus as the 'inviter' indicates that the invitation is to a way of humility that will lead to rejection and suffering: from this Christianity emerges as absolute contemporaneousness with Christ. History does not change Him, but He wills to change us. This element of contemporaneity is described as the different between poetry and reality. 'What really occurred (the past) is not (except in a special sense, that is, in contrast with poetry), the real. It lacks the determinant of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness, the "for thee". The past is not reality – for me: only the contemporary is reality for me. What thou dost live contemporaneous with is reality for thee. And thus every man can only be contemporary for the age in which he lives – and then with one thing more: with Christ's life on earth; for Christ's life on earth, sacred history, stands alone for itself outside history'. (3) This calls to mind Barth's 'years of revelation', and also the basis of his whole doctrine of the Word of God. The essence of religion in this context might be spoken of as a lack of the very contemporaneity of Christ about which Kierkegaard is here speaking.

If it seems that what we have said of Kierkegaard's doctrine of Subjectivity runs completely counter to Barth's doctrine of the absolute Subjecthood of God, then we must consider further the place of the Object in Kierkegaard. This will lead to a reflection on the meaning and significance of paradox. In the Unscientific Postscript Kierkegaard writes 'Faith is subjectivity in its highest exercise; not because it has no object, but because its object is the paradox that "the eternal came into being at a definite moment in time, and as an individual man"'. (4) There is a great difference, as James Brown points out, between the kind of subjectivity posited by Schelling in which the object is no more than a projection of the subject, and a subjectivity that is

(3) Kierkegaard : Training in Christianity E.T. Oxford 1941. p.67

(4) Kierkegaard : Concluding Unscientific Postscript p.512

based on the co-relation of subject and object as poles in a relationship, a dialectic between the perceiving mind and the real world of existence. (5) Here in Kierkegaard the Object is sufficiently strong to prevent a 'Nietzsche-like final madness'. But the objectivity is not of the order or nature that it can be defined, crystalised or directly appropriated. To this extent Brown is right to suggest that Kierkegaard 'would have repudiated with horror' any suggestion that the Christian view of God, man, or the world could be derived from any particular logic or mode of thought. This would be merely 'a new assertion of immanence'. (6) This however does not mean the objectivity is totally impotent, or indeed is in any way secondary: 'while faith continues to hang on for very life to an objective uncertainty, this infinite passion of subjectivity is yet completely motivated by an object, by something which it did not produce, by something which in the end produces the subjectivity'. (7)

There is here then a real sense of the object engaging the subject; not by direct relation, however, but through the tension of paradox. Any attempt to resolve the paradox particularly the ultimate paradox of Incarnation, can only be an attempt to avoid the issue. Doctrine that exposes and highlights the paradox is good, for it then enables the paradox to 'become' more readily real to the subject; but where it seeks to explain the paradox, it moves into the realm of direct knowledge, for as Barth quotes Kierkegaard 'Spirit is the denial of direct immediacy. If Christ be very God, he must be unknown, for to be known directly is the characteristic mark of an idol'. (8) Similarly Kierkegaard explains in the Philosophical Fragments 'If the contemporary generation had left behind them but these words "we have believed that in such and such a year God appeared among us in the humble form of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community and finally died", it would be more than enough'. (9)

We must now consider the nature of paradox as it relates to a doctrine of God. Let us consider the argument developed in the Philosophical Fragments, under the heading 'the absolute paradox'. (10) Kierkegaard starts the section by urging that the paradoxical be not despised. Socrates spent a life-time trying to resolve the paradox of his relation to the Monster, Tryphon. So 'one should not think slightly of the paradoxical, for the paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without passion is like a lover without feeling – a paltry mediocrity'. (11) The highest pitch of every passion, however, is to will its own downfall. So reason seeks a collision, even though this means its own undoing. So 'the supreme paradox of all thought is to discover something that thought cannot think', (12) – but habit all too

- (5) J. Brown 'Subject and Object in Modern Theology' SCM 1955 p.58  
 (6) Ibid p.62.  
 (7) Loc. Cit.  
 (8) Barth : Epistle to the Romans p.38  
 (9) Kierkegaard : Philosophical Fragments, Princeton 1946 p.87.  
 (10) Ibid p.29  
 (11) Op Cit. p.29  
 (12) Loc. Cit.

often dulls the senses, and prevents our perceiving it.

On the basis of the Socratic doctrine of recollection, man knows what he is. Yet his reason in this sense is opposed to his passion, which is still driving towards a collision. Reason's own passion collides with its own findings and seeks to unsettle it: somehow it brings itself into contact with the unknown. Now if, Kierkegaard continues, we call this Unknown 'God', it is folly to go any further. If God doesn't exist, He cannot be proved, and if He does exist, any attempt to prove His existence would equally be folly. This, he says, is reasoning, from existence, and never to it. To prove that the Unknown is God, is not to prove God, but merely to develop the content of the concept 'God' that is based on the presupposition about the unknown. Further, between God and His works there must exist an absolute relationship – the works of God are such that only God can perform them. But they are seen to be visible only in that they do not immediately manifest themselves. This is the major presupposition of paradox, and indicates that man can ultimately only work from a position of faith. So, says Kierkegaard, as long as I continue to prove God's existence, it will elude me, and His existence will not emerge from the attempt. It is only when I abandon the attempt that suddenly His existence is there again. The paradox is that reason only achieves its end when it ceases to function as reason.

The passion of reason has brought it into collision with the unknown; it cannot advance, yet neither can it stop itself being occupied with this particular problem. Thus the Unknown is the limit to which Reason comes. At this point the Unknown becomes the dynamic, the utterly different. God can remain only the single idea of difference (c.f. the Infinite Qualitative Distinction). Yet once again the paradox emerges in that of itself the Unknown cannot be a disclosure, since we cannot conceive an utter unlikeness. Reason cannot negatively transcend itself.

Throughout this section we have outlined, the concept of paradox has been emerging, without being specifically defined, since that would be contrary to the entire concept at issue. This piece of argument cannot but have influenced Barth in his development of the concept of the 'Frontier' and the 'Boundary', which effectively represents the pressure-point between the two distinctive elements in the divine-human paradox. Indeed, that religion in Barth seeks to thrust man to the frontier and at the same time seeks to seize for itself the status that belongs to God alone, is already hinted at by Kierkegaard when he says 'Deepest down in the heart of piety lurks the mad caprice which knows that it has itself produced a God'. (13) And further we might usefully make a comparison between Barth's talking of the critical self-turn that religion makes against itself, and Kierkegaard's continuing in the

Philosophical Fragments by saying that Reason brings God as near as possible, and yet he remains as far away as ever. But reason at last goes astray because it uses itself – the like – to empty itself of all but the unlike. It is trapped by its own modus operandi. It has to learn that God is other, and yet it cannot learn it of itself. The paradox here is that we need God in order to understand even that we cannot understand.

Kierkegaard then goes on to discuss the paradox in terms of 'the offended consciousness': offence is that which occurs when reason is left with an unfulfilled love as a result of a non-establishment of a working relationship between reason and the paradox. The significant thing is that for Kierkegaard 'Offence' becomes a key-note in his doctrine of transcendence. And this in turn may give us some clues as to Barth's doctrine of revelation. At root, Kierkegaard says, offence is always passive. Self-love, when it resorts to deeds of daring, is in fact passive and wounded. An active offended consciousness could always tear itself from its cross, but a passive one will always allow itself to be destroyed. This passive offence cannot derive from the reason, else it would avoid self-destruction, hence it must derive from the paradox. Indeed the offended consciousness is understood by the paradox, and in its turn, echoes it. And the greater the passion aroused by the offence, the more evident its source in the paradox. So, he says, offence 'comes into being' with the paradox. (14). The 'coming into being' now takes on a particular significance. It reflects the moment upon which everything depends. 'The moment is the paradox in its most abbreviated form'. (15) If we once posit the moment, then everything else follows, and the offence is seen to represent a misunderstanding of the moment.

The final section of his argument suggests that to reason the paradox is absurd, since reason will always seek to master and control it. But Paradox is also Miracle, and this is why reason finally wants nothing to do with it. If reason offers to help the paradox, paradox understands why reason does this, but 'it decides to declare reason a dunce and a blockhead' for trying to 'trivialise' the Supernatural. (16). Thus at last the paradox is seen to be the operation of the supernatural, that is unintelligible to reason except where it drives reason to the frontier, and meets it when reason gives up the attempt.

For Kierkegaard the Incarnation is the final paradox. And in a sense this is true for Barth also. The latter's doctrine of revelation through the 'coming' of the 'Word' both in the Incarnation and the present 'moment' echoes much of the drift of the argument outlined above. And the opposition of revelation to religion in Barth has

(14) : Op. Cit. p.41.

(15) : Ibid

(16) : Ibid

a clear antecedent in Kierkegaard's claim that it is the offended consciousness that seeks to explain and rationalise the Paradox while claiming to have discovered the method for itself. It does not admit either that it has in fact received its own existence from the Paradox, or that it has used what is referred to as the 'acoustic illusion' to make bogus claims for itself. The illusion is in fact that the offence is echoing the content of the paradox, when all the while it thinks it is engaging in an autonomous piece of work.

It will have become clear that this doctrine of the Paradox that contains a strong sense of the Transcendent, and a clear surrender of the reason to the paradox, is worked out in almost direct opposition to the philosophy of Hegel, which was very much in vogue at the time Kierkegaard was writing. The possibility of a positive advance being made by the positing of a synthesis out<sup>of</sup> a conflicting thesis and antithesis is ruled out the moment the paradox plants its question mark against the whole process of rational thought as a means of understanding God, man, and the world. This is why so much of Kierkegaard's life was devoted to violent preaching against the religion of his day. Indeed, in his Training in Christianity he writes 'Christendom has done away with Christianity, without being quite aware of it. The consequence is that, if anything is to be done, one must try again to introduce Christianity into Christendom'. (17) This can be seen as one more reason for the enthusiasm that Barth, especially in his early years, showed in the work of Kierkegaard. Their two situations were not at all unlike, and in view of the general ignorance of Kierkegaard that existed among European theologians until Barth's time they might well be seen as part of a similar movement and radical change of direction.

For Kierkegaard the offence of the paradox lay at the heart of the matter. It was the offence of Christianity that was being overlooked and indeed systematically undermined by the church of his day. The offence of the Incarnation showed itself primarily in two Ways : one was the 'loftiness' of the God-Man, the offence being that a man should claim to be God; and the other was the offence of 'lowliness' – in that God should be willing to suffer. (18) But the basic possibility of the offence lies in the refusal of God to employ direct communication. This is the whole mystery of the suffering of Christ, (19) a mystery which the church sought to systematise and control. Indeed, 'take away the possibility of offence, as they have done in Christendom, and the whole of Christianity is direct communication, and then Christianity is done away with, for it has become an easy thing, a superficial something which neither wounds nor heals profoundly enough; it is the false invention of human sympathy which forgets the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man'. (20)

(17) Kierkegaard: Training in Christianity p.39

(18) Op. Cit. p.83 ff.

(19) Op. Cit. p.136.

(20) Op. Cit. p.139.

This refusal to employ direct communication is the basis of Kierkegaard's understanding of faith. Faith emerges in trust, when a question-mark is set against the person believed in. A direct manifestation would be easy to believe, since it is easily grasped, but an indirect one can only be encountered in faith. This again is a basic attitude that we find at the heart of Barth's theology: It is expressed thus with dramatic clarity – 'faith is awe in the presence of the divine incognito' (21) And again, 'Unto faith is revealed that which God reveals from his faithfulness. To those who have abandoned direct communication the communication is made. To those willing to venture with God, He speaks. Those who take upon them the divine No shall themselves be borne by the greater divine Yes'. (22)

What we have seen in Kierkegaard is undoubtedly of the greatest significance to Barth. We have paid particular attention to the concept of paradox; to the objection to direct forms of knowledge of God; to the subject-object relation in Kierkegaard; and also the meaning of faith. All of these have seen to be particularly relevant to the criticism of Religion worked out by Barth: not only do they provide the basis for his attack on the mainstream of nineteenth century theology, but they also provide the foundation on which the concept of True Religion can be built up. (23).

(21) Barth : Op. Cit. p.39.

(22) Op. Cit. p. 41.

(23) For which, see Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER FOUR : THE WAY FORWARD

## a) Barth's Concept of True Religion

In the light of the massive criticisms amassed against the concept of Religion by Barth, it is hard to envisage how he can happily go on to write a whole section entitled 'True Religion'. It becomes even more paradoxical when it is realised that this is not a section tacked on to the end of the criticisms by way of an apology to those who might have taken offence, but is rather a fully integrated part of the argument that Barth is putting forward.

Barth sets the scene in his opening remarks in his section entitled 'True Religion': "the preceding expositions have established the fact that we can only speak of 'true' religion in the sense in which we speak of a 'justified sinner' ". (1) And just as the sinner's justification is questionable as soon as it is claimed as by right, so too the Christian Religion, as soon as it ceases to be in its very self forgiven, 'stands under the judgement that religion is unbelief, and that it is not acquitted by any inward worthiness, but only by the grace of God, proclaimed and effectual in his revelation'. (2)

A second key strand that may help to guide our thinking about 'true religion' is to consider the importance of the word 'true'. Barth's very precise use of language might lead us to detect a connection between the word 'true' in the sense of 'true religion', and the word 'true' as applied to Jesus Christ himself. So 'Theology must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles, however better, or at any rate more relevant and illuminating they may appear to be: as though he were a continuation of the knowledge and Word of God, and not its root and origin, not indeed the very Word of God itself'. (3) In the German the connection between 'very' and 'true' is more clearly visible than in the English. And again, the link is made with Jesus as the Way the Truth and the Life (Jn 14.6) in a passage that speaks of Jesus Christ as the immanent God from whom the Church is to expect everything (4) On this basis it might be conjectured that for Barth, the significance of the term 'true' in relation to religion is precisely that there is no true religion outside the dynamic of the person of Jesus Christ. The filling out of the concept religion by the coming of Jesus Christ is alone what gives to the term any valid or true substance. And that substance is vitally bound up with the on-going redemptive activity of Jesus Christ.

Let us now consider the movement of Barth's argument as he discusses the concept of true religion. (5) No religion, he says, is true in itself. But a religion

(1) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.325

(2) Ibid, p.327

(3) Church Dogmatics 2.2 p.4f.

(4) 2.1: p.319.

(5) 1.2: p.325-61.

can become true as a result of its becoming a creation of Grace. We may only claim truth for the Christian Religion, if we are prepared to face revelation's judgement upon the claim itself. In the book of Exodus there is a demonstration of the judgement of revelation upon the religion of Israel, through Moses, the man of Grace. In the New Testament also Peter as Peter is seen as a man condemned, yet the disciples, as the disciples of Christ are branches of the true vine – men responding to the activity of Grace. Justification is by faith, but faith is not the same as religious self-consciousness (and this for Barth is a key distinction between his own thinking and that of Schleiermacher) (6) True faith compels a man to think beyond self-consciousness. Further, true religion is only possible in faith, as we abandon all the securities that we have created for ourselves. Thus Barth reminds us of Paul's words 'When I am weak, then am I strong'. (7) But while faith is not to be compared with the religious self-consciousness of Schleiermacher, Barth's understanding of the need to abandon all securities reflects not a little of the doctrine of absolute dependence put forward by Schleiermacher. The distinction <sup>he is</sup> trying to stress appears to relate more to a rejection of the idea of dependence being based on a 'feeling' – which itself for Barth is another human security – than to the concept of dependence in itself. On this point at least, history has drawn an unduly strong line between the thinking of these two great men.

Christianity however, Barth goes on, cannot claim to be true religion unless it recognises its own religious self-consciousness to be nothing without the gift of grace in its weakness. This clearly underlines the point made in our last paragraph. For Barth the great danger of Schleiermacher's methodology was that it leads to a rejection of the priority of Grace, which, as we have noted time and again, is at the heart of Barth's entire thought. Barth illustrates this danger by highlighting three periods of history. Before Constantine, the early church was a persecuted minority. It had to make its way over against the vast mass of paganism throughout the Roman Empire, and its only resource was the Grace of God. The problem only began to arise as the leaders of the church began to make defence of the faith on the basis that it was a better religion than its pagan counterparts. The mistake was both to see paganism as a counterpart at all, and to fail to see the judgement upon Christianity as a religion as much as upon the specifically 'pagan' religions themselves.

After the recognition of the Church by Constantine, the church-state relationship led swiftly to the total removal of the priority of Grace, and Christianity as a religion among religions was fully established. Christianity was seen as better in terms of culture, morality, and monotheism – a rich self-consciousness indeed, but

(6) 'Faith' for Barth is much more clearly established as a function of the revealing activity of God in Grace. The response itself is a gift of God. For Schleiermacher, however, faith is more man's response to the existence within his own being to of a God-consciousness - for which c.f. the discussion of Schleiermacher at p. 32ff.

(7) 2 Corinthians 12.10

one that lacked both grace and love.

Thirdly, Barth identifies the modern period, since the Renaissance, which has seen the collapse of the 'Corpus Christianum'. Rather the church has become 'used' by the state, and seen by it as little more than a tool or a status-symbol. The expansion of the church through missionary activity has led more to a confrontation of cultures, than to a proclamation of revelation and Grace.

Barth's conclusion from this somewhat sorry analysis is that the only possible context in which it might be appropriate to speak of Christianity as the true religion, is that of a doctrine of forgiveness. (8) But more of that presently. Barth continues his argument by stating that Christianity is the history of the contradiction between Grace and religion. (9) 'But in the history of Christianity, just because it is the religion of revelation, the sin is, as it were, committed with a high hand. Yes, sin! For contradiction against grace is unbelief, and unbelief is sin, indeed it is the sin. It is therefore a fact that we can speak of the truth of the Christian religion only within a doctrine of the justificatio impii. The statement that even Christianity is unbelief gives rise to a whole mass of naïve and rationalising contradiction.' But it is this very fact that shows us how true and right the statement is'. (10)

Grace, however, contradicts even man's own contradiction of it. Christianity can therefore become the true religion as it recognises the validity of the concept of Grace for the graceless. And yet even the recognition itself is an act of grace. And he adds this crucial statement: 'When we ground the truth of the Christian religion upon grace, it is not a question of the immanent truth of a religion of grace as such, but of the reality of the grace itself by which one religion is adopted and distinguished as the true one before all others'. (11) The crucial factor here is the way round that the statement is made: for Barth goes on in the next sentence to say 'It is not because it is a religion of grace that this happens, nor is it because it is so perhaps in a particularly insistent and logical way. But conversely, it is because this happens that it is a religion of grace in an insistent and logical way'. So it is in the very action of Grace's exposing religion for what it is that it becomes possible for us to see that through a particular religion we are brought face to face with Truth, and therefore it is by this process that that religion may be identified as the true religion. To get the movement of Barth's thought absolutely clear, it is necessary to quote him once again from the same section: 'It is in this way, in the very encounter with God,

(8) One influence on Barth to give such a prominent place to the doctrine of forgiveness in relation to true religion must surely be Martin Luther, who makes a direct connection between forgiveness, and true religion: 'the true and only religion ... is to believe in the free forgiveness of our sins, without works, out of pure grace alone .. To trust in this God who is gracious to us out of pure love and who does us good 'for nothing', that is the true religion and the true righteousness' [Werke Weimarer Ausgabe (1883) 25.287]. Luther does not appear to use the term 'true religion' in as technical sense as does Barth, but the parallel is nonetheless a strong one, since it sets the context of true religion firmly in the court of the initiating grace of God.

(9) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.337-8

(10) Ibid

(11) Ibid p.339

the site of which we call Peniel or, may it be, Evangelical Reformed Christianity, that the face of God is seen, and therefore Peniel or Evangelical Reformed Christianity is the true religion. But we must not forget that it is not the symptoms, and therefore not the site that we call by this name, which demonstrate the true religion, but that it is the truth itself which is the basis of the symptoms, and distinguishes the site, so that we can call it this without being tied down to the site and 'symptoms'. (12)

This latest quotation seems to be of the utmost importance to our understanding of the concept of true religion, since it seems to point the way for Barth's thinking to move forward, to explore the movement of Grace in the world, wherever and whenever it is manifested. It gives the lie once and for all to the idea that Barth's theology is static and only capable of interpretation within a strictly defined dogmatic formula – that of formal neo-protestantism with which his name is automatically associated. His primary concern is with the coming of grace and man's experience of that coming: that is the significance of Christ, and for that reason it is to be explored within the context of the Christian religion.

In this context the religious life of man is primarily one of response to a grace that is given. Thus at the heart of any true religion is a dynamic and relational response, something constantly alive, and active in the present moment. The element of response is crucial, since it makes a statement about the nature of man – that he is a relational being – and also because it indicates that ultimately justification is not a man-centred concept, but a God-centred event.

Barth illustrates this point by referring to two significant movements in the history of Buddhism. The cults of Yodo-Shin, and Yodo-Shin-Shu were established in the twelfth century on the belief that the earlier forms of Zen-Buddhism were too austere, and too demanding for the average person to be able to follow. Redemption was by man's effort to follow the 'path of holiness', which was all but unattainable. The Genku reversed this approach by laying heavy stress on the promise of Amida that he would not rest till all men shared with him in his enlightenment. All that the people had to do was to put their trust in Him, and thus accept the gift of life. Barth does not set this parallel up as an alternative True Religion to the Christian one rather, he uses it to illustrate the massive about turn that this approach brought to the Buddhist religion in its time, and also to stress that the idea of the priority of grace is one that is not entirely exclusive to Christianity. However, he concludes at the end of his excursus on the subject that Yodoism cannot parallel Christianity as a full religion of Grace, since only in Christianity is acknowledgement given to the act of Grace (not the concept alone) in the person of Jesus Christ. Once again it is the act of relation in

the present to the person of Christ that finally allows the church to claim Christianity as the True Religion: 'the church listens to Jesus Christ' and also 'the church has to be weak in order to be strong' (13)

We have detected so far two major themes<sup>in</sup> relation to true religion in Barth—the priority of Grace, and its present experience. The final part of Barth's section under this title in the Church Dogmatics takes up the second of these themes in the context of the Church. So precise is the movement of his thought in this matter, that it is well worth our while to quote once again: 'That there is a true religion is an<sup>event in the</sup> act of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. To be more precise, it is an event in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. To be even more precise, it is an event in the existence of the church and the children of God. The existence of the Church of God and the children of God means that true religion exists even in the world of human religion'. (14) The first part of this statement is once again laying down the grounds on which alone it can be claimed that such a thing as true religion can exist at all. Just as man can only meet God as he is first met by Him, so the human structure of religion can only 'come alive' as life is given it. Once again, this is not dualism that condemns all human matter to be of itself worthless and lifeless, but is rather an extension of a doctrine of creation that first of all acknowledges that God IS Creator, not merely that He WAS creator. We are dealing with an area in which Barth has constantly been misunderstood. What Barth is surely driving at is that every act of existence is only so because God is who He is — the Creator. Thus we see that the angle Barth is pursuing is not at all dissimilar to the distinction between I—Thou and I—It, as developed by Martin Buber, of which we shall be thinking more later.

The second sentence in the passage quoted above refers to the life of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is seen as the outpouring of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, and by connection with the next sentence, as the one intrinsically bound up with the life of the church. The Spirit is not only the simple fact of the existence of the life of the church, but it is also the essential relationship between the church and God Himself. But it is always God's Spirit, not the Church's, so that the very existence of the Church is itself is an act of Grace. And for that reason it can be seen as the evidence of true religion. Thus the life of the true Church can only be effected as response to the free Grace of God, in that Grace. And the fact that the church does so live is not the basis of its life but simply the fact of it. It's basis is the Grace of God, which itself is identical to 'the name of Christ'.

The relationship between the name of Christ and the Christian Church is the only basis on which it can be considered the true religion. Barth's stress on the idea

(13) Ibid p.344

(14) Ibid

of the 'name' of Christ is not insignificant: the Old Testament concept of Naming implied not only a direct relation to the one named, but a recognition of the true standing of that person, and their right identity. Thus the Name of Jesus Christ takes on the significance of relating to those who recognise Jesus as the Christ. This implies a recognition, Barth tells us, that 'as the eternal Son of God he became man' and that in Him 'the revelation of God among men, and the reconciliation of man with God has been fulfilled once and for all'. (15) Because of this there is a relation between the Name of Jesus Christ, and the Christian Religion. But this relation must be analysed very carefully, to avoid its misconstruction, and Barth attempts this in four ways.

In the first instance the relationship between Christ and the Christian religion may be seen as an act of Creation. In a present act, Jesus Christ creates the Christian religion. This is saying more than that there is simply an historical connection between the person of Jesus and the religion that subsequently grew in his honour. It is also talking in a very contemporary way, in the light of what has already been mentioned in connection with the Holy Spirit. For apart from its being continually brought into existence by the outpouring of the Grace of God in the Holy Spirit it is once again reduced to the level of unbelief. Or again to use the terminology of Martin Buber, the relationship I-Thou is reduced to the state I-It. Thus the name of Christ is not something that can be added to the Christian Religion to make it True: it is the very source and reality of the truth itself. Take away the name of Christ, and 'Christian theology loses the substance in virtue of which it is not philosophy, or philology, or historical science, but sacred learning'. (16)

Secondly, Barth suggests that there is an act of election intricately bound into the relation between Christ and the Christian religion. Considered on its own, he tells us, Christianity is merely one possibility among many others. In itself it has nothing particular to commend it. Therefore if it is real, in the sense in which we have seen it to be an act of creation, then it must also be something chosen freely by God for His own purposes. It cannot in any way be deduced as an historical necessity from the history of Israel. This suggests that the line on which Barth is defining the state of true religion reflects his understanding of the character of God Himself, Creator and Elector (and, as we shall see, Justifier and Sanctifier). Once again we see Barth's methodology being employed not only to convey his argument but also in its very structure, to reflect the argument itself.

The third aspect of the relationship is that it reflects an act of justification, or forgiveness. In itself Christianity is quite unworthy of being the true religion.

(15) Ibid p.345-6

(16) Ibid p.347. c.f. Martin Buber : Eclipse of God p.46

Without Grace, it remains entirely human. So its very reception of Grace reflects the fact that it is already being forgiven, and is being offered life purely as the free activity of God. We are dealing with a dynamic cycle, a relationship that exists only as all these separate elements are brought into constant new life. The one question that is relevant to the assessment of true religion is the status of its adherents in the eyes of God. And they of course, are forgiven by the judgement of God in Christ. Their religion is therefore 'True' since Truth is determined by the judgement of God. Thus the life of the Church will only remain vital and True as long as the Church constantly roots itself in the forgiveness of God.

The final aspect of the relationship allows us to see it as an act of sanctification. The justification of the Church by Christ involves a positive relationship between the two. The recollection and expectation of revelation constantly re-kindles the event itself. It is not justified because it is Holy; rather it is made holy because it is justified. So Barth again says 'It is at this point we link up with what we earlier described as the twofold subjective reality of revelation, which is the counterpart in our realm of the objective revelation in Jesus Christ. The Christian Religion is the sacramental area created by the Holy Spirit, in which the God whose word became flesh continues to speak through the signs of his revelation.' (17)

In the light of what has gone before, and of Barth's criticisms of religion, what else can we say by way of summarising the meaning of the term 'true religion'? We have already mentioned in particular the fact that true religion demands an understanding of the Priority of Grace, and also a setting that is in the living present. To take the above four-fold analysis of the relationship between Christ and the Church a step further, we must see it as highly significant that the four parts are very much inter-related, so much so that we can really only talk of them in terms of a dynamic cycle – a cycle in which each one is feeding the others and without which the others would be unable to stand alone. Whereas in his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Barth was able to describe Religion as 'the crater left after the shell had exploded', he has now gone on to describe the internal dynamics of the explosion itself. But of course the very point that he is making is emphasised – the danger of true religion becoming mere religion – by the very way he has described the process. Is it ever possible to record, to pin down and make permanent, the dynamic state to which he refers? To quote Heinz Zahrnt 'Is it in any sense possible to "draw the bird in flight"'? This is to ask for speech about what cannot be uttered. This was the problem Barth was bound to see himself faced with as a theologian in regard to this 'permanent actualism': "Does one single word of mine formulate the Word after which I am striving, and which I long to utter in my misery and hope? Does not each

sentence I frame require another to dissolve its meaning?" (18) Zahrnt implies that Barth does not answer this point, and remains a victim of his own problem. However, we suspect that Barth would be among the first to admit the danger, but also to point out that rather than attempting to 'draw the bird in flight', he is attempting to outline the conditions under which the bird may be free to fly again.

Taking up Barth's exploration of Justification, it is worth noting a comment made by Paul Tillich in his book The Protestant Era in the section on the theme of the Boundary Situation: 'The profoundest aspect of justification in our situation and for the men of today is that we can discern God at the very moment when all known assertions about 'God' have lost their power'. (19) There must here be an echo of all that Tillich owes to Barth, and it is particularly significant that he links up the idea of justification with that of the boundary situation: for as Barth went to such lengths to point out in Chapter 7 of Der Römerbrief religion takes man to the very frontier of human experience, and there exposes to him the redundancy of his own resources. Only then is he receptive to the incoming Grace, or justification of God. At this point the negative content of 'religion' and the positive value of 'true religion' highlight the critical significance of the Frontier itself.

The existence of true religion is not an accident that is tacked on to the end of Barth's lengthy criticism of the concept, but as we saw earlier it is an integral part of that criticism. In fact it is an integral part of the doctrine of God and of the Incarnation. That doctrine would itself be void were there to be no possibility for true religion, for it reflects the way in which man can live in living relationship with God. The problem has been referred to elsewhere in terms of the subject-understanding of God being reduced to an object-understanding. Thus Gogarten has written of the easy confusion 'which infiltrates not only theology, but influences everyone who not only relates himself to revelation in belief (that is, allows it to be the subject), but also thinks about it, and makes it an object. And who does not repeatedly fall from the posture of belief to that of thought and knowledge'. (20)

Finally we must look at the implications of Barth's understanding of true religion for the understanding of God's revelation to man. We have already looked at Barth's comments on the relation between the name of Jesus and the existence of a community of faith. We noted that the name was significant in that it implied 'standing in relation' to, and 'giving worth to': this seems to us to imply primarily a relationship to the 'contemporaneous Christ' in the living present, and then subsequently a connection between that and the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. Being a member of the community of faith is a factor of the initiating Grace of God

(18): H. Zahrnt The Question of God p.29

(19): P. Tillich The Protestant Era p.201

(20): F. Gogarten, in The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology Ed. Robinson: Jn Knox Press. p.118

experienced at the frontier of a man's human capability, and not immediately of man's ability to associate that confrontation by the divine, with the historical person of Jesus. That becomes part of the process of supplying a theological structure within which the encounter can be understood and responded to. Yet it is the very person of Jesus that allows this to be possible. This is of critical importance to the way in which Barth's thinking has been taken forward by the proponents of 'religionless Christianity' – notably Bonhoeffer and Tillich, both of whom owe an enormous amount to Barth. This is a very helpful step forward, since it allows the debate about religion genuinely to step outside the limitations of dogma and formulary, and to move more directly into the field of relation and non-relation, which as we have already seen is where the initial encounter with God is most normally experienced. (21) Theological doctrine, as Barth points out at the end of his section on true religion is vital in that it must reflect the reconciling and sanctifying work of Christ in the community, but is in no way crucial to proving Christianity to be the true religion.

(21) Thus by moving a stage back from the "dead letter" syndrome re. 'Religion' the issue is freed to turn on the question of whether God initiates an activity, or whether man attempts to seize the initiative for himself. The former is relational, the latter denies relation.

**b) The Significance of Martin Buber for developing Barth's concept and criticism of religion.**

In our study of Barth's concept of true religion, several themes became dominant. Religion in its positive 'true' sense was that which did not exist by and in itself, but was witnessed to by the existence of the church and the children of God. It was something fundamentally initiated by God and active in response to his initiation in Grace. We noticed also Barth's constant attention to the fact that it existed in the living present, and was a contemporaneous and regenerating event. It was a dynamic function inextricably linked to the name of Jesus Christ; and it existed within the inter-relationship between creation, election, forgiveness, and sanctification.

We have also noted earlier that much of the thinking that influenced Barth, as his understanding of the subject developed, derived from the dialectical thought of Kierkegaard. It was this that allowed Barth's theology to move into the context of the living present as its primary arena, backed up by the inter-relationship between this present, and the movement of history – particularly the history of revelation. For in the final analysis Barth's theology is one of revelation, and man's response in Grace to that revelation of Grace. And revelation is received through man's being encountered by God, in the present, at the point at which he has reached the limit of his own human resources as they finally highlight their own bankruptcy.

Religion is lifeless except life be given it by God. This is a theme that is echoed again and again in the writings of Martin Buber, the Jewish Philosopher-Theologian, to whom reference has already been made several times. In fact the common cause discovered between these two men is quite remarkable, considering the differences of their backgrounds and traditions, and that they had little if any personal relationship during their lifetimes. The themes mentioned above as emerging from Barth's discussion of True Religion also reflect many of the major interests of Buber: immediacy, response, relation, contemporaneity, and so on. It seems well worth while looking a little more closely at the parallels and differences between them, to see what light they can throw on the ways in which the direction of Barth's criticism of religion can best be taken forward.

Let us look first at Buber's background, and set his teaching in its true context. Much of his early inspiration was drawn from the Jewish Hasidic tradition, which placed much stress not on pantheism, but on panentheism – a mystical tradition that explored the presence of the divine in every situation. His understanding of the presentness of the divine experience was taken further by the overall Jewish stress on the value of the deed done, not the faith it expressed. To Buber's early thinking, Maurice Friedmann tells us, good is decision, while evil is directionlessness. (1) Much stress is

(1) M. Friedmann Martin Buber - The life of Dialogue RKP p.31

also put on the idea of encounter, which is seen as something dangerous, since it leads to an exposed existence: this brings the key moment right into the living present, enabling him to say 'Godless is the theologian who places his God in causality'. (2)

Buber derived much inspiration from Kierkegaard, as did Barth, but not surprisingly, the difference in the traditions of these two men led them to move on from Kierkegaard in rather different directions. Barth took up, in particular, the concept of paradox, and the dialectic method, while Buber moved from the idea of the tension of opposites to the discovery of the possibility of meeting 'in-between' – from dialectic to dialogic. In this movement he was also influenced by Simmel and Feuerbach,(3) the latter of whom had earlier led the way away from understanding man in purely individualistic terms.

Buber published his book 'Ich und Du' in 1923, though, as Kaufmann points out in his introduction to that work, the earlier draft was on paper in 1919, as part of a larger work, which he abandoned on the ground that it was becoming over-systematic. It is interesting that the year prior to the publication of Ich und Du, unknown to Buber, an Austrian by the name of Ebner had published a book in which he pointed to the vital significance of the 'Thou' – the actual encounter with the other person – to modern thought. (4) In 1923 also, and unknown to either of the others, Gabriel Marcel also explored and wrote about the concept of the 'Thou'. Buber develops his thinking further than the others, and his starting point is the belief that the subject-object distinction that had dominated epistemology since Greek-times, is a false one. Rather man is equipped to approach life with two different attitudes, which he defines with the primary word-pairs 'I-You' (here following Kaufmann's preference for 'You' over 'Thou') and 'I-It'. 'I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something ... The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. But the realm of You has another basis'. (5) But, 'whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something, there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said there is no something. You has no borders. Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.' (6)

For a marked parallel to Barth's stress on the Subjecthood of God, we should look in particular at the way Buber understands the word-pair I-Thou to be significant of far more than just the call and response between two people, or a person and what is over against him. (7) In every act of relation I-Thou, there is the element

(2) c.f. Feuerbach - Frommanns Philosophische Taschenbücher 1.2 p.37. Stuttgart 1922.

(3) Ibid p.41, 68

(4) Ebner: Das Wort und die geistigen Realitäten - Pneumatologische Fragmente 1921

(5) Buber: I and Thou tr. Kaufmann E & T Clark 1970 p.54

(6) Ibid p.55

(7) For which, only a careful reading of I and Thou is appropriate.

of response to what Buber calls the 'Eternal Thou': the eternal Thou is that which cannot become an It. In other words it exists only in relation — it can only be addressed. This is how Buber talks of God. 'In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze towards the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You, in every sphere according to its manner'. (8) Thus in every moment of relation, there is the element of response to the Eternal, and there is a giving and receiving of being. Of particular interest to our discussion of religion, is the idea that the Eternal Thou is that which cannot become an It. In other words God cannot be reduced to an object, to an experience, to being merely information. In that case the word simply becomes devoid of its content. What must be given up in man is the self-asserting instinct 'that makes a man flee to the possessing of things before the unreliable perilous world of relation'. (9)

It is with this idea that the parallels between Barth and Buber become important. Despite the differences of tradition, background and methodology, both men are passionately concerned with the living element of the divine-human encounter. It is worth contrasting once again the passages to which reference has already been made separately. In the Church Dogmatics, Barth says 'the problem of religion is simply a pointed expression of man in his encounter and communion with God. It is therefore a chance to fall into temptation. Theology and the church and faith are invited to abandon their theme and object and to become hollow and empty and mere shadows of themselves.' (10) And Buber makes a similar observation thus: 'Religion as risk, ready to give itself up is the nourishing stream of the arteries; as system, possessing, assured and assuring, religion which believes in religion is the vein's blood which ceases to circulate. And if there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow man as morality can, religion can hide from us as nothing else can, the face of God'. (11)

Again we might contrast Buber's statement that 'Dogma, even when its claim of origin remains uncontested, has become the most exalted form of invulnerability against revelation', (12) with Barth's suggestion that questions of canon and dogma are only secondary to the establishment of True Religion and indeed may be the very denial of it. (13) While the precise context of Barth's remark relates to the establishment of 'The' true religion, it is nonetheless relevant in that 'the true religion' is true only insofar as 'true religion' can be a part of it. (14)

Mention has already been made of two other significant passages showing the common theme between Barth and Buber at this point, the one relating to Buber's demonstration of how God removes himself from lifeless formulae, the other being the

(8) I and Thou p.57 c.f. also p.150

(9) Friedmann op.cit. p.70

(10) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.283

(11) Buber: Between Man and Man Fontana 1961 p.36

(12) Ibid

(13) Church Dogmatics 1.2 p.360-1

(14) c.f. the parable of 'organisation' at Sawston School, in E M Forster's The Longest Journey Penguin p.48

comment from Gogarten about the dialectic method which so much influenced Barth. (15) A further, and perhaps more interesting parallel may be found between Buber's idea of the Eternal Thou standing 'in-between' two parties to a relation (compare 'In the beginning is the relation' (16) and Barth's comments on how religion (as the law) hinders the activity of revelation: 'Nor has religion difficulty in answering objections to this or that particular form in which it presents itself, for it is in religion that human capacity appears most pure, strong, penetrating and adaptable. Religion is the ability of men to receive and to retain an impress of God's revelation .... the law then, precisely as this human possibility, has entered between'. (17)) As the law is likened in Barth to religion, and religion is the human opposition to revelation, so it may be seen that it is within Barth's position to see revelation as being the 'in-between' of the divine-human encounter. Thus the significant parallel is that the activity of the divine is once again seen to be in the sphere of the living present, and is part of a relational dynamic.

When Barth speaks of the problem of attempting to 'capture the bird in flight', he raises a problem of which he and Buber remain in the end divided. There are occasions for Barth where God has to become an object, if the overall Subjecthood of God is finally to be preserved. Buber finds it difficult to allow the term God to have any meaning when it is used in the sense of being an 'It' for purposes of description: he does however confess to the need to be able to speak about God as well as to God. His fear is that God will be turned into an object of 'faith' where faith means no more than assent to a belief. This would reduce God to the level of being an object of knowledge, a piece of information. The danger of faith, thus understood by Buber, is that it first completes, but then replaces the act of relation. Tillich pursues the same idea in these words: 'Resting in belief in an It takes the place of the continually renewed movement of the being towards concentration, and going out to the relation'. (18) This is not a far-cry from the 'critical turn of Barth's religion. However, on Buber's argument, Barth falls into the trap of reducing relation into faith (though not on Barth's definition of faith), while on Barth's promise of God constantly coming to man where his own securities are left behind, Buber's position is inadequate unless he firmly commits himself to God's being Subject in the act of relation. This in the end is an irreconcilable difference between the two men, but it is a difference based on how they reached their positions, not on what their respective positions say to the problem of religion. Where their worlds meet is in agreement that God is met in a dynamic act of relation, in a meeting of claim and response.

Further light on the understanding of religion is thrown by considering the doctrine of revelation in both men. To Barth, as we have observed throughout our study,

(15) c.f. section on True Religion refs. 16 & 20.

(16) I and Thou p.69.

(17) Barth: Der Römerbrief p.183-4

(18) Tillich: Systematic Theology 1. p.113:

religion is opposed to revelation: revelation is the coming of God in Grace when the activity of religion has made its critical turn against itself, leaving man totally exposed at the frontier of his own experience and ability. The life of God is received in revelation both in the 'years of revelation' – the life of the incarnate Christ – and also in the ongoing life of the Church.

Barth's re-affirmation of a doctrine of revelation was one of the key turning-points in the history of theology; however he was not alone at the time in meeting the attacks of philosophy and psychology head-on. Buber also had a strong belief in a doctrine of revelation, though it was less explicitly worked out. In the final analysis the question that Buber acknowledges as important is whether the doctrine of 'I–Thou' is contained entirely within the horizontal cross-reference of inter-personal experience, or whether that which comes 'in-between' comes from a revealing God – or as he would more happily say 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. He puts the matter like this: 'Men who are still 'religious' in such times usually fail to realise that the relation conceived of as religious no longer exists between them and a reality independent of them, but has existence only within the mind – a mind which at the same time contains hypostasised images, hypostasised 'ideas' '. (19)

The basis of Buber's doctrine of revelation seems to be couched in the actual relation I–Thou: this cannot of itself be reduced to a mere concept, since of itself it has its being 'in-between'. In this first instance this does preclude a purely self-sufficient concept of being human, though at this stage it has nothing to say against the possibility of its reflecting merely a corporate humanity, that would still be criticised by Barth for being anthropocentric, not theocentric. However we find that Buber takes the matter rather further: 'In the committed I–Thou relation there is knowing access to a reality which is otherwise inaccessible; that uncommitted 'objective' knowledge which observes as an It what may also be encountered as a Thou is a lesser kind of knowledge, and that the most profound mistake in all philosophy is the epistemological reduction of I–Thou to I–It knowledge, and the metaphysical reduction of Thou to It.' (20) Buber is here clearly talking of a different form of knowledge altogether, from that of rational enquiry, a knowledge that is received in the 'in-between' (21) a concept that throws helpful light on our approach to the meaning of Barth's understanding of a God of Revelation.

E.L. Fackenheim in his article on 'Buber's concept of Revelation' suggests that to establish the validity of Buber's concept of revelation it is necessary first to show that I–Thou is a religious category, and that religion is not identical to the I–It state; also, secondly, we must show what criteria separate religion from other I–Thou's, and

(18) : Tillich: Systematic Theology 1. p.113

(19) Buber: Eclipse of God Harper Torchbooks; p.13.

(20): Quoted in E.L. Fackenheim's article 'Buber's Concept of Revelation' in Schilpp, The Philosophy of Martin Buber p.281

(21): c.f. John Taylor's concept of the Spirit 'in-between', in The Go-between God, SCM 1973, ch.1.

thirdly, we must locate revelation within the category of I-Thou. (22) The concept is at once taken out of the court of the purely intra-personal in this way: 'Feelings are a mere accompaniment to the metaphysical and metapsychical fact of the relation which is fulfilled not in the soul, but between the I and the Thou.' (23) These words echo those of Buber himself in relation to marriage, where he maintains that the relationship cannot be based on feelings alone, but on what is actually revealed one to the other. Buber quite clearly takes it beyond a merely inter-personal event, to include in that event what is its very basis, an act of receiving: 'even the combination of both (feelings and institutions) still does not create human life, which is created only by a third element-the central presence of the You, or rather, to speak more truthfully, the central You that is received in the present. (24) Further, what is received is also that which is 'addressed' to the parties in the relation. Buber is anxious to avoid the idea of revelation being something that is quite distinct from the human involvement, but rather the address is of a Thou who is in what he communicates. At first sight this might appear to be in direct opposition to Barth's understanding of revelation as that which is the coming of God into a human situation, but on a closer look we discover that once again the direction of what the two men are saying is parallel, each from his own tradition. For in the end what could be closer than for Buber to allow that all response to the Thou reduces it, and binds it to the It-world, and for Barth to maintain that revelation only takes place at the limit and frontier of man's independent existence? In each case the value of a person's independent autonomous existence is undermined, and the centre of existence is shifted to that which comes to the individual, effecting a dynamic relation.

What distinguishes the religious 'Thou' from other 'Thou's'? For if nothing, then indeed we are left with a mere system, with Barth's 'religion', in which the idea of the Thou becomes a mere fancy once again. For Buber, God is posited as the Thou who cannot become an It. He is therefore the Moment God, known in the very act of relation alone; to reduce the name to mere information is to evacuate it of all true meaning. (25) However, this runs the danger of the understanding of God becoming entirely mystical, and so Buber maintains that in the moment of revelation, no It can retain its independence. In the act of revelation every It becomes a symbol through which God speaks. But the symbol is not known in thought rising above the encounter itself.

Fackenheim maintains that it is the wrong question if we ask if the revelation exists independent of the response. For he maintains that Buber claims

(22) : c.f. which, for what follows

(23) : Fackenheim, op. cit. p.283.

(24) : I and Thou p.95

(25) : Eclipse of God p.45-6

revelation to be an address to a Thou (26) ; Revelation needs its Thou, but (and this seems to echo Barth's doctrine of Grace), 'Being a Thou' is not a human activity per se, but is itself a product of revelation. And so he aptly quotes Buber : '(God) is the Infinite I that makes every It his Thou' (27), and 'In order to speak to man God must become a person; but in order to speak to him, he must make him also a person'. (28) :

Fackenheim's conclusion is that Buber's doctrine of revelation cannot be philosophically established beyond all doubt, and that in the end his critique of the I-It stance is based upon I-It methodology. This may be a correct judgement, but it is not necessarily one that Buber would be unhappy with, since if revelation were finally and philosophically established, we would in the process of so doing have reduced it from its capacity to contain the Thou, and would have tied it once again to the world of It. This backs up Fackenheim's conclusion that in the end in Buber we are dealing not with a pure philosopher, but with a Hebrew sage speaking from within the position of a living commitment to the God of Israel, which again confirms the validity of paralleling his approach to that of Karl Barth.

Thus it is clear that Barth and Buber share some elements of a common understanding of the doctrine of revelation. Both maintain that it is the coming of God to man that establishes identity and being; both agree that revelation is a relational activity, initiated in the Eternal, and worked out in the dynamic of call and response; and both admit to the priority of the grace that flows out to men. Where they differ, as they clearly do in origin, it is on the degree to which the dialectic principle is applied, and the measure to which the 'in between' is seen as related to or distinct from the two poles that it separates.

However, in our search to understand the meaning of true religion it seems important to recognise the differences between the two men, and to explore a way forward in the light of what each is saying to the other. Barth's particular emphasis in the light of all the history on which his outlook rests, is that the absolute priority and subjectivity of God must be maintained in our understanding of the human situation. Thus his position would have to criticise Buber for being unwilling openly to define God as the Other, independent of his revelation, or of the human response to His revelation. Also he would see it as a human limitation placed upon God if we maintained that God can only be known to exist in the moment of encounter, and that outside the encounter there is no knowing the divine at all.

(26) . . . Fackenheim op.cit. p.288 . . .

(27) . . . Between Man and Man p.56 . . .

(28) . . . Buber: The Prophetic Faith Macmillan 1949 (N.Y.) p.164. . .

Buber in his turn would be unable to accept Barth's stress on an objective revelation through the Incarnation, since this would be to reduce revelation to an It-state in historical terms, and would place too great a stress on a particular moment of revelation at the expense of all the others. Further he would not be able to tolerate the separation that Barth demands between the activity of God and the activity of man. Thus if the positive side of Barth's argument is to stress the subjecthood of God and the initiative of his Grace, the great value of Buber's position is to explore the way in which the revelation does take place among men; and also to locate real living – true life, or even true religion – in a relational sphere.

Having already highlighted the central point, that we feel the two men to be moving in the same direction from different positions, the criticisms that each offers to the other's position do not demand an exclusivist distinction between them, but they effectively speak to each other in a dynamic relation of their own. For the insights of the I–Thou model applied to Barth's method open it up to a new understanding, and the parallels between the language that each has used (see above) throw light on each other. For example, Buber's analysis of history in terms of It-information that can ever and again become a Thou in the present allows a glimpse of what Barth means by talking of revelation in the life of Jesus Christ, and revelation in the living experience of the church. And indeed the doctrine of Incarnation in Barth is not nearly so exclusively objective as it at first appears if the inter-relation between history and the present, the particular and the general, is allowed its own dialogic.

Finally, it is interesting to note Buber's comments on Christianity. His chief problem is to understand how Christians try to limit the self-revelation of God to one period of thirty years. (29) He accepts the Hebrew concept of Faith (Emunah), but objects to what he sees as the Hellenism of Paul's concept – Pistis. However, it is perhaps a significant contribution from the whole tradition of Protestantism that lay behind Barth, that faith be seen far more as response in relation, than the placing of confidence in a series of statements or pieces of 'information'. But his deep understanding of Christianity, and his attitude to it are best expressed in his own words, which indicate the great value to Christian theology of all that he was: 'From my youth onwards I have found in Jesus my great brother. That Christianity has regarded and does regard him as God and Saviour has always appeared to me of the highest importance, which for his sake and my own I must endeavour to understand. My own fraternally open relationship to him has become ever stronger and clearer, and today I see him more strongly and clearly than ever before' (30) .

(29) c.f. Friedmann op. cit. p.286 ff.

(30) Buber: Two types of faith. RKP 1951, p.12 .

From the discussion above it is clear to us that the categories used by Martin Buber are a useful and viable set of tools which can enable us to take forward Barth's concept of religion and seek to understand its significance more fully, without being unfair either to Karl Barth or Martin Buber.

## CONCLUSION :

**SOME IMPLICATIONS OF BARTH'S CONCEPT  
& CRITICISM OF RELIGION FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH**

The purpose of this study has been to understand the significance of Barth's concept and criticism of religion. Just as the problem for Barth was raised in a pastoral context, so it has been for us. And just as for Barth the criticism of religion he offered spoke directly and meaningfully to the task upon which he was engaged, so his conclusions demand that we also seek to apply them to our contemporary situation. In detail this is beyond the scope of our study, but it must be an integral part of the study at least to point the way in which his argument is directing our thinking.

In the course of our study we have looked at Barth's problem, set it in historical context, and compared and contrasted the ways in which Barth approaches it in different pieces of his writing. We have looked at the theological development Barth outlines behind the growth of 'religion', and seen the way the nineteenth century was a key period in the development of the problem. We noted the polarisation brought about by Barth's break with his theological ancestry, and looked carefully at the implications of the methodology he employs. Finally, we have looked at the positive side of his 'criticism', and sought ways of allowing his concern for the living present to go beyond even his own times. Hence the forward looking note of this conclusion is offered as an integral part of the study we have undertaken.

First of all, our study has indicated that the problem of religion is a far deeper one than being merely about institutions. In its essence the problem is one of priorities – whether in all our thinking, all our methodology, and all our community life, God is ultimately prior, always the Initiator, always the Revealer. The great reversal of history has been the systematic reduction of our doctrine of God till he is left not as God but the principle, the logical necessity at the end of the chain of human reason. Barth's cry to the theologians, and to the lay Christians of his day was concerned with the sovereignty of God.

Barth's concept of true religion indicates clearly that the Church is an institution, a human institution, but that it becomes The Church only through the fourfold activity of God in creation, election, justification and sanctification. But in response to the activity of God the Church has to reflect in its own internal structure and existence the fact that its existence in any sense as 'true' is dependent on that fourfold activity of God. This activity of God is a dynamic one, rooted in the basic movement of call and response, and so we may conclude that the institution we call the Church must root its institutional life primarily in an attitude of

responsiveness, that is always placing itself freely under the judgement and reconciliation of God. This means that Barth's concept of religion amounts to an attack not upon institutions in themselves, but upon institutionalism. The difference is that institutions, human as they are, are capable of being shaped and used by the living Church in response to the fourfold activity of God, whereas institutionalism by its very nature denies the element of response, and feeds purely upon the closedness of the human order.

Clearly that is by no means all that needs to be said about the life of the institutional church, but it is the significant starting point that is highlighted in Barth's concept and criticism of religion as we have understood it, and on that level it provides a substantial take-off point for contemporary thinking, albeit outside the scope of our present brief.

Barth has maintained that self-communication is part of the three-fold nature of God: it is of His own choice and will that He is a revealing God. And Barth has shown us in his study of the problem of religion in theology that there has been a long and subtle historical process by which the actual self-communication of God to men has been replaced by a bogus form of communication of the knowledge of God, in that the church has sought to pass on from generation to generation its understanding of revelation, rather than to allow that revelation to take place anew and afresh to each succeeding generation. In other words the vehicles of communication have been reduced from their true function to being handed on as the communication itself. Religion is the indication that God has been squeezed out of the very vehicles he might have used for his own self-communication. Hence Barth's insistence that revelation was not historically confined to the 'years of revelation', but is also present in the life of the (true) Church.

Now we have concluded, in our section on 'true religion', that the significant aspect of the divine-human encounter is that it takes place in the living present: man is confronted by God, as he is where he is, and the communication is received in an inter-personal and relational sense, reflecting the 'contemporaneity' of Christ. It is received and responded to on the gut-level. There is then involved a human process by which that encounter is handled psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually, and at any of these levels 'religion' in the sense that Barth uses it raises its ugly head and threatens disaster. There is a constant danger of the language, the categories and the symbols with which the moment of revelation is handled seizing the revelation and seeking to displace it. The history of the church in the present century is riddled with evidence of this process.

The problem facing the Church in the light of all this is just how does it, as a human institution seeking to reflect its internal experience of divine revelation, arrange its structures, language and creeds to allow the Holy Spirit freedom to encounter men and women as and where they are. It is the same problem, in different guise, that society faces as a whole in seeking or organise its social structures in such a way as to allow people living within them the maximum freedom to explore the significance of life in the context of justice freedom and truth.

While Barth does not answer these questions directly in his critique of religion, there is one key point that does emerge: religion, like the Pauline concept of 'flesh', has something basically to do with being human. Religion, in its attempt to displace God from his position of ultimate priority, reflects the fallen nature of mankind. Religion can only become 'true' as it is itself placed under its own judgement (the critical turn it makes against itself) and under the judgement of revelation. But the judgement of revelation, Barth maintains, carries with it the possibility of redemption, again through the fourfold activity of creation, election, justification and sanctification. So just as there is by this the possibility of 'true' religion, so the structures life and language of the Church also have the possibility of validity, as they themselves come under the criticism of religion, and the judgement of revelation. This will imply that all human structures can and must only be provisional in nature, capable and ready to dissolve themselves as and where they cease to serve the contemporaneous encounter with Christ.

Thirdly, while it is clear that Barth insists that God's self-communication to man depends upon his will and revelation, it is none-the-less clear that there is a problem for Christian proclamation in the method by which preaching is undertaken — as Barth clearly was aware through his experiences in Safenwil. The problem is by no means unrelated to the points already mentioned above, but it is helpful to look particularly at the implications of Barth's doctrine of revelation. Revelation may be defined as that process by which man is confronted by God, and by the ultimate truth about himself and his significance. This confrontation can only take place, we have discovered from Barth, at the frontier, the limit, of man's own possibility. Therefore the confrontation comes in the form of threat, risk, and holy insecurity. It is our contention that it is precisely because it comes in this way, that it is of supreme relevance to our modern urban-church situation.

For threat and insecurity lie at the heart of urban man's life-style and situation. He is threatened by the insecurity of his employment; by his forced dependence upon others in the City playing their part; by his lack of knowledge of

the issues putting equal pressures on others in his City; by a soulless concrete jungle, and by a lack of say in his own destiny. In the face of this, he withdraws into what little security he has, and he fights to preserve it, domestically, economically and politically.

In the threat, the revelation of God is already making its presence felt, but it offers a radical alternative to the withdrawal (which is not a far cry from 'religion'). Barth's critique of religion is crucial here because it sets out the priority of the encounter by God with man where he really is. The method by which that encounter is made articulate and concrete is secondary to the fact that it happens. It is reduced to religion as soon as a particular form or model is laid down outside of which it cannot be articulated. Part of the church's four-fold response must therefore be to constantly place its own forms, models and symbols under the same threat and confrontation in its attempt to respond to the grace which can enable it to be in any sense 'true'.

Finally, we would do Barth a great injustice were we not to add that no statement we make or conclusion we draw from our study of the concept and criticism of religion can be called final. All we have written, the judgements we have made and the conclusions we have drawn, must themselves be constantly placed under the same threat, the same question-mark, lest they too rise up and seize for themselves the finality that belongs only to God.

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