

Karl Barth's theology of nature: Safeguard against the natural theologies of both fundamentalism and secularism

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand Karl Barth's theology of nature as a safeguard against the natural theologies of both religious fundamentalism *and* atheistic secularism. It will be shown that Barth's theology of the Word of God, incarnated in Jesus Christ, at the same time rejects the divinisation of humanity *and* the secularisation of humanity. With growing intolerance in the world due to religious fundamentalism, and with atheistic, "tolerant" secularism also threatening, Barth has shown the church how to steer between these two extremes by giving witness to the Creator's reconciliation and redemption of all creatures through Jesus Christ. Not by glorifying the faith of the creature, but by having faith in the Creator, we gain the freedom to affirm all of creation for what it is, neither divine nor completely secular and cut off from its Creator, but God's creation, of which God says: "It is good."

1. INTRODUCTION

As the world is experiencing rising pluralism due to the effects of globalisation, one would expect increasing tolerance between different cultures and religions. Very often, however, the opposite seems to be true. Instead of progress in understanding and peace between different nations, cultures and sub-cultures, the world is still plagued by intolerance, wars and especially a growing tension between the "Christian Democratic West" and the "Muslim Totalitarian Middle East," spurred on by religious fundamentalism. What aggravates this situation, is the fact that tolerance, understanding and peace is usually on the agenda of the atheistic secularists, which convinces the religious fundamentalists that they are furthering God's cause. It seems that only one of two stances is possible: either to be an intolerant believer, who stands firm against secularism, or to be a tolerant atheist, who embraces secularism. This is of course an extreme oversimplification, but still, in the political realm stances must be simplified: you either vote *for* the ruling party or *against* it, you are either *for* war or *against* it, you are either pro-life or pro-choice, you are either *for* homosexuality (which eventually includes gay marriages and the adoption of children by gay couples) or you are *against* it (which eventually means disregarding the human rights and dignity of anyone in a homosexual relationship). Few individuals would take a very firm stance on either side of the scale, but because of the tension between religious fundamentalism and atheistic secularism, and also because of the limitations of party politics, people are forced to do so. How is the church to respond in times like these? It does not take much theological thinking to understand that the church can not support religious fundamentalism which gives rise to intolerance, fear, hatred and war, but it is equally plain that the church must guard against the

growing atheistic secularism in society. Indeed, the church might be the *last* safeguard in modern society against complete secularism.

P.L. Metzger believes that Karl Barth already gave the church very clear direction in this regard, with his dialectical-incarnational theology that simultaneously de-deifies *and* de-secularises the world of human culture (Metzger 2003:60-61). Metzger claims that Barth faced a similar problem in the 20th century than we do in the 21st century, namely the danger of the secularisation of culture threatening on the one side, and the even more serious danger of the divinisation of culture threatening on the other. And the more threatening the one becomes, the more threatening the other also becomes in reaction to the previous. Metzger explains how Barth found a theological path that can move within this tension: “In the face of such extremes, namely, the divinisation and secularisation of culture, Barth came to conceive God as wholly other, wholly distinct from humanity, yet also, wholly one with it, in inseparable relation to it in the person of Jesus Christ. The divine Word becomes human without the human nature becoming divine” (Metzger 2003:63). In response to historical events such as the terrorist attack on the twin towers on 11 September 2001 and the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq that followed, Metzger says: “Not only has America (and the West as a whole) been guilty of separating the sacred and secular dimensions of reality, but also it has within itself, especially in conservative Christian circles, the propensity to divinise the American state in times of crisis. In times such as these, how does one guard against the extremes of the total secularisation of culture, on the one hand, and the divinisation of culture, on the other hand?” He continues to say that Barth’s theology can help us in this tight rope act, in as much as Barth encountered similar extremes in his day and succeeded, not faultlessly but to a very large extent, to engage theologically with culture in such a way that the sacred and secular dimensions are kept in distinct yet inseparable relation to each other. Barth maintained this tension by focusing on the reality of Jesus Christ as the ultimate safeguard against the secularisation and the divinisation of culture (Metzger 2003:xxi).

I agree with Metzger. In the theology and person of Karl Barth, we find a path that is not easy to tread, but that never releases the tension between the divinisation of culture on the one hand and the secularisation of culture on the other. Someone might argue that Barth was not confronted with such a strong reality of atheistic secularism than we are today, but I would disagree, since Barth was faced with atheistic communism in the cold war years. Thus the tension between atheistic secularism and religious fundamentalism was maybe even greater than today, since that tension held the threat of a nuclear war. Although everybody would not agree with Barth’s response to communism (Metzger certainly does not), Barth’s theological and personal grappling with the tension between the very real and very threatening divinisation and secularisation of humanity gives us enough reason to take a closer look at this theologian.

2. BARTH AND MODERN CULTURE

Metzger contends that it would not be accurate to argue that, in contrast to Schleiermacher’s “cultured despisers” of religion, Barth was a “religious despiser” of culture. Merely Barth’s love for Mozart already puts such a notion into question (Metzger 2003:xii). Barth’s son, Christoph, testifies to his father’s this-worldly life: “During all those years I knew him as a hard-working, passionately fighting and at times deeply troubled man, who nevertheless enjoyed life, good company, and good music and was amazingly disposable to his family. Theology – this was my conclusion from early childhood onward – must be the most joyful, the most exciting of all sciences” (McKim 1986:6).

It would be a mistake to think that Barth was not a modern theologian (Jonker 1988:33). He always rebelled against being labelled as a neo-orthodox theologian. Barth’s studies made him a

modern theologian through and through, who understood the modern mindset and worldview as well as anyone else (Busch 1975:54). And even after his disillusionment and “break” with modern theology in 1914, Barth still remained a child of modernity who engaged with modern culture. Even in his old age, when he was asked in a radio interview about his criticism of liberalism, Barth, in his typical radicalising and tongue-in-cheek style of arguing, described himself as more liberal than liberals. Once again he laughed at the term neo-orthodox and insisted that he was more “open” and more “free” than liberals to listen to revelation, because he was even willing to listen to orthodox theology, which they were not (Barth 1977:33-36). Here Barth was not only being cunning, but quite to the point. Barth’s disillusionment and “break” with modern theology did not mean a reversal into pre-modern theology, but rather a theology that is not satisfied to look for answers only within the parameters of modern culture, but that is open for answers that are beyond modern culture, answers that come from the living Word of God.

In *The epistle to the Romans* Barth turned to the Bible to find answers that modern culture and theology could not give him. The event which ultimately gave rise to this commentary of Barth was the First World War, and 93 German intellectuals and theologians giving support, even *theological* support, to Germany’s war effort. Confused and utterly disappointed by modern theology, Barth started looking for answers, not in modern culture anymore, but in the Bible. The answer Barth found was that God alone is God, that humanity is not God, and that God’s existence puts all human actions under divine *krisis*, i.e., divine questioning and judgment. In this way, Barth launched a scathing attack upon the divinisation of modern culture. This attack must be understood as coming, not from someone who believed himself to stand “above” or “outside” modern culture, but from someone who was devastated and appalled by the fact that such horrible things could stem from a culture of which he was a part and in which he used to believe so dearly.

Metzger argues that Barth was correct to emphasise in this context the distinction between humanity and God, but that he neglected at that time to also stress the humanity of God, which is revealed by the Word. Barth himself later reflected that he was at that time only partially in the right (Metzger 2003:35). With the benefit of hindsight, I would agree with Metzger that perhaps Barth was too one sided in *The epistle to the Romans*, but it is difficult to know whether Barth’s “positive” affirmation of humanity in later years would have been correctly understood, had he not cleared the playing field in those early days of any possibility of an identification between humanity and God. The fact that Barth would not even concede to his colleague Brunner that there is a “point of contact” between humanity and God shows that Barth was very aware of the always threatening danger of an identification between humanity and God. Had Barth written his doctrine of creation, without making the distinction between God and humanity so undeniably clear, it could have been perceived as a new, only more nuanced way of describing the inherent divinity of humanity and culture. Barth made sure this was not possible.

But even more than this, was it not completely necessary for Barth to be as “negative” as he was of culture in his early theology? Is that not what the time called for? When a whole nation is going to war and the majority of its intellectuals are supporting and legitimising it, will a theologian be heard if he gives a “balanced” account of the theology which is under-girding these errors in judgment? It seems to me that Barth never tried to be a “balanced” theologian, but rather a critical one. This is immediately obvious in the uniqueness in his style of writing. If you pick up and read the work of most theologians today, you would find that it is calm, nuanced, balanced. Not Barth. His style is always rhetorical. He takes a position and walks with it to its full conclusions, and with his engaging way of writing, he intends on taking the reader with him. Then, with his next work, it is as if he starts again from the very beginning and intends of walking the full distance again. Therefore many contemporary readers find Barth’s theology arrogant, obnoxious and offensive. Barth conceded that his theology was one-sided in those days, but I am

wondering if that was not exactly what was needed at the time. If Barth had not said a loud and clear “No!” early on, I doubt whether his critique on the theology and culture of the day would have been taken seriously enough, and whether the “Yes!” that he gave in later years, especially in his *Church Dogmatics*, would have been correctly understood.

3. BARTH AND 19TH CENTURY THEOLOGY

Barth believed that the errors of modern theology stemmed from the theology of the 19th century. If a name could be linked to this theology, that name would be Friedrich Schleiermacher, because he, for Barth, was the best exponent of the liberal theology which came from that century. Here Barth found the fundamental shift of theological focus from God to humanity. Instead of talking about the God in whom Christians believe, this theology started to speak of the faith of humanity in such a way, that it ended up describing faith in faith, or faith in humanity, rather than faith in God.

Although Barth was very critical of his modern heritage, Barth never discarded its contribution. Especially the giants, such as Kant and Schleiermacher, were always revered by Barth – he would never be done with them or put them behind him. Barth had the ability to be severely critical of the theological heritage that he inherited and yet at the same give lectures that were appreciative of it, as in his work “Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century.” Barth did not appreciate his contemporaries’ outright rejection of their predecessors, because he felt the dead should not be criticised in the same way as the living, and because he felt that it is impossible to merely step over the gigantic contribution these fathers of theology and philosophy made. Barth was committed to keep on struggling and fighting and conversing with them till his death (Metzger 2003:26).

About the difference between his theology and that of the 19th century, Barth says: “We have lived through harder times, have endured worse things than they did, and we are thereby, strangely enough, made freer. We are removed from certain battles and involvements in which they were caught in the course of their opposition to and conversation with their apparently sunny age. We can breathe more freely, just because the air has become rawer. Modern man can no longer impress us, as he impressed them, in the light of his performances in this century” (Barth 1960:16). The strong point of the theology of the 19th century, according to Barth, was that it was open towards the world, as all theology should indeed be. But its weakness, says Barth, was that its openness towards and conversation with the world was its primary concern, and in the process it forgot what theology in fact has to say and to give to the world (Barth 1960:17).

Ironically, the 19th century theology’s emphasis on how the Christian faith relates to contemporary culture, made it more difficult for theologians to respond to movements within history and culture, because the Christian faith was understood as a pawn in the development of history and culture, rather than a revolutionary agent within history and culture. “The Christian was condemned to uncritical and irresponsible subservience to the patterns, forces, and movements of human history and civilisation. Man’s inner experience did not provide a firm enough ground for resistance to these phenomena” (Barth 1960:26). In an address to pastors in 1922, entitled “The Problem of Ethics Today,” Barth claims that theologians and philosophers in the previous century did not really ask the ethical question: “What ought we to do?” in earnest, because they felt that modern culture already gave the answer. Barth says: “Fundamentally, it was a matter not of asking *what* to do, as if that were not known, but rather of finding out whether philosophy or theology, Kant or Schleiermacher, provided the more illuminating formula for the obvious – for it was obvious that what to do was to further this infinitely imperfect but infinitely perfectible culture” (Barth 1928:145). In this century dogmatics was viewed as obscure, irrelevant

and difficult, while ethics was seen as clear, relevant and easy to partake in. For Barth, the 20th century revealed the opposite as true, namely that following Jesus' teachings of the Sermon on the Mount is in fact impossible for European culture and that Paul's dogmatics in Romans – the doctrine that all fall short of the glory of God – is much closer to the actual situation (Barth 1928:147-148).

Barth was grateful for the theology of the 19th century for emphasising the historical nature of the Christian faith and praised that as the biggest achievement of this theology. Because the history which surrounds Jesus Christ is the focal point of the Christian faith, the historical nature of the Christian faith is the one aspect that sets it apart from all other religions (Barth 1960:27). Barth, however, raises the question whether the fundamental questions about Jesus Christ was not bypassed by these theologians. Barth doubts whether it is possible for modern researchers to stand "above" Christianity, to reach "beyond" the texts of New Testament, and to access in this way the historical existence of Christ. Is the living Word, Jesus Christ, in whom Christians believe, and to which the New Testament and the accounts of the Church witness, not the ground, content, and object of our faith, rather than merely the original phenomenon of the Christian faith? Barth asks himself whether these theologians, in an attempt to be relevant to their age, had not ceased to speak in the only *relevant* way that one can speak of Christianity, which is from within (Barth 1960:29-30)?

Many theologians believed that Barth had laid liberal theology to rest, but today liberal theology is as popular as ever. This, I think, is a good thing, since very often those theologians who latch on to Barth's critique of liberal theology, are neo-orthodox theologians, or even fundamentalists, of whom Barth would also be critical. As Barth appreciated 19th century theology's concern for the people of its time and its desire to make theology relevant to those people, we can appreciate the same concern and desire of liberal theology today. Moreover, liberal theology's emphasis on human dignity is very important to guard against the intolerance of religious fundamentalism. However, Barth's critique against liberal theology still stands: is goodness something inherent in humanity, or is it something graciously given by God to humanity?

4. A THEOLOGY OF NATURE VERSUS NATURAL THEOLOGY

Within an unfolding post-modern era, we can find clues in the theology of Barth, who was critical of the inherent goodness in humanity and culture, especially modern, "Western" culture. By merely asking this one question: "How on earth is it possible that two world wars and the Holocaust had its roots in the highly 'civilised', 'Christian', modern culture of Europe?" post-modern thinkers lose their confidence in the inherent goodness of humanity and culture. In the South African context we can merely ask: "How on earth is it possible that Apartheid was created and sustained for so long by an extremely conservative and devout 'Christian' nation, whose roots also lay in the modern culture of Europe?" The answer, it seems, is that "inherent goodness" in humanity, civilisation, culture and religion is not to be trusted. Therefore Barth rejected all forms of natural theology, which tries to find inherent goodness in the creature, usually by focusing on the faith of the creature. Barth replaced natural theology with a theology of nature, which emphasises the goodness *of the Creator*, by focusing on faith *in the Creator*.

The fact that the Word entered Jesus Christ and did not enter every individual, means that faith can in no way be misused as a form of deification of humanity. Modern Protestantism, however, with its focus on the faith of the human subject, rather than on the object of faith, namely Jesus Christ, could not escape this danger and was always vulnerable to Feuerbach's critique (Metzger

2003:69). But the Neo-orthodox movement, of which Barth was originally perceived to be a part of, was experiencing the same danger. Since the otherness of God was emphasised, it was difficult not to fall victim to the complete absence of God, and eventually to the death of God. To guard against this, Neo-orthodoxy in general reverted back to the subjective faith encounter as the only point of contact between God and humanity (Metzger 2003:71). But in this regard, Barth was fearless, and refused to move back into the subjective sphere of faith. Not letting in any possibility of divinising humanity, Barth clung to the otherness of God, and claimed that faith is to be found not in the individual believer, but in the personal revelation event of the Word.

Furthermore, says Metzger, Barth wed the otherness of God to God's oneness with the world, which is possible through the incarnation. Through Jesus Christ, God is at the same time wholly other and wholly one with the world. And lastly, concludes Metzger, although Barth completely and utterly rejects the idea that nature is a revelation of God as in natural theology, which is a necessary safeguard against all forms of divinisation of mis-worldly culture and humanity, Barth says that the creation gives an objective witness to God and along this path Barth develops a theology of nature (Metzger 2003:72).

Barth was so thorough in his rejection of all forms of natural theology, that he would severely criticise his colleagues for even the smallest indication of leaving the door ajar for natural theology. Willis mentions this in Barth's understanding of Christian ethics: "[Barth] takes issue with both Brunner and Bonhoeffer over their reading of the natural (under the rubric of 'orders of creation' and 'mandates', respectively), in that it is given at least an apparent partial autonomy in relation to the grace of God ... Barth's movement beyond the employment of an ethic grounded in either 'orders' or 'mandates' is achieved through an inclusive description of the natural in terms of the sanctification of all life accomplished in Jesus Christ, which results in man's being provided with certain penultimate 'spheres' within which he can live in freedom," (Willis 1971:187).

A theology of nature is possible and necessary, as long as it does not move over into natural theology. Very easily it can happen that the conclusion that the eye of faith can see that the creation gives witness to God is broadened to conclude that the unbelieving eye can be brought to faith by seeing God in nature. This is where the temptation of natural theology lurks, for as wonderful as this might sound, this is exactly the point where the divinisation of the secular reality starts. As soon as the order of particular revelation that leads to general revelation is reversed to general revelation that leads to particular revelation, the safeguards against the divine sanctioning of secular realities are given up. Nature should be seen for what it is, and in that way it will be a witness to the Creator. But if nature is seen for what it is not, namely divine, then it is no longer a witness to the Creator, but a divinisation and self-justification of the creature.

Barth warned us that we are mistaken if we think that it is easier to believe in God's work of creation than in the rest of the confession of faith. Faith does not come in steps of progression, of which faith in the Creator is the first and lowest step. All of faith, faith in the living, triune God of the Bible that we confess in the church, is completely dependant upon the Self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Faith in creation or the work of creation does not bring us any closer to faith in the Creator, but faith in the Creator brings us to faith in God's work of creation (Barth 1949:50).

This may sound like a technical, speculative theological debate which is far removed from the real word, but it is in fact extremely relevant to everyday life. In Barth's day this reversal of the order of our knowledge of faith lead to the theological justification of supporting Hitler's reign, since the rise of Nazism was seen as a revelation of God's will for the German people and therefore Hitler's leadership was seen as divinely sanctioned. During Apartheid in South Africa the natural difference between different races was seen as a revelation of God's divine order wherein different races should be kept apart. This served as a theological justification for the atrocities and human rights violations which occurred during Apartheid. Today, the Christian debate regarding

homosexuality seems to be based almost completely on natural theology, on *both* sides of the debate, since the question is asked whether homosexuality is part of God's natural order, rather than the question how God redeems nature. Today, also, in the tension between, the "Christian West" and the "Muslim Middle-East," the question is asked on whose side God is on, which culture is a general revelation of God's will, in stead of how God will redeem both cultures.

Natural theology seeks goodness in a given culture or humanity, whereas a proper theology of nature, such as Barth's, views goodness as something which is absent in every culture, in all of humanity, but which is spoken to humanity by the Word of God, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God reconciles and redeems all of creation, every nation and culture, and says to it: "It is good," despite all its sinfulness and corruption.

5. DEDEIFICATION AND DESECULARISATION OF HUMANITY

Metzger praises Barth's theology of the Word, which made it possible to criticise the divinisation of humanity, especially in Germany in the first half of the century. "In the face of Hitler and the 'German Christians' who employed natural theology for the propagation of the Aryan gospel, inspired as it was by the orders of creation and the evolutionary movement of history, Barth championed the theology of the Word. This Word comes to humanity from above, calling into question all mere human words. Such a dialectical orientation enabled Barth to critique that pseudo-gospel that identified the kingdom of God with the Third Reich, which was supposedly based on a 'second source of revelation' in addition to the Christ revealed in Scripture" (Metzger 2003:168).

Already in his first commentary on the epistle of Romans, long before the rise of Nazism, but with the German war effort in the back of his mind, Barth warned that the divine renewal of humanity can in no way be confused with human progress. No monarchy, capitalism, militarism, patriotism, political liberalism or even social revolution can be identified with the coming of God's kingdom. God's free actions in this world can not be politicised to suit our ideologies, and our human actions, even if they are the noble ideals of democracy or social democracy, can not be divinised to give them a Godly sanction. Barth would be grossly misunderstood if one took this to mean that a Christian is to abstain from the political sphere, as his activities as the "red pastor of Safenwil" indicate. But from very early in his life, Barth made it clear that our political responsibilities as Christians and citizens have to be accompanied by a sober and realistic view of the secularity and imperfections of all human actions (Jehle 2002:41-42).

Barth, in his theology and person, was very involved in the world and also in politics. His theology was not a justification of his political ideology, but there was a continual movement between theology and praxis in his life. McLean shows that Barth's emphasis on the sovereignty of God alone, de-absolutised every man-made system or structure, even socialism, which Barth supported politically. McLean argues that Barth saw God's transformation of the world as something which is not merely for the inner life of individual, but which transforms the whole world, is communal in scope, and is biased towards the poor, the marginal, the oppressed and dispossessed (McLean 1981:64).

Metzger, however, is critical of Barth for not fully escaping the danger of the secularisation of humanity in his comments on atheistic socialism in the second half of the century. Metzger says that Barth was not wary enough of the fact that atheism is in fact just a new form of religion and that it is thus not so openly and honestly secular as Barth claimed, but rather quasi-secular. "Now given the dangers found in both the socialist and democratic models considered, Barth's attempt to remain objective in the face of the plethora of political systems is praiseworthy. Neither the atheistic state of the East nor the seemingly agnostic or indifferent state of the West is to be

championed. Nonetheless, having said this, the church and state stand in too distinct a relation to one another in Barth's discussion of atheistic socialism. The church must not only speak out when the state is quasi-religious, but also when it is quasi-secular, as in its Soviet (or, for that matter, American) form. The state can only be truly secular if it has the church or perhaps another institutional religious form as its counterpart, serving as a check to its ambitions, reminding the state of the kingdom that transcends it (Metzger 2003:190).

I think Metzger's critique is valid. But I also think that he makes too much of Barth's singular comment that the atheistic socialist state of Hungary is openly and honestly secular, when Barth tried to explain his "silence" in the light of the occupation of Hungary, and Metzger makes too little of Barth's context. Jehle shows that if Barth was living in Hungary, his comments on the socialist state in Hungary would have been different, as is clear in his letters to his colleagues who were ministers there. But living in the West, with everybody being so confident that the Western democratic form of state is good and the Eastern communist form of state is evil, it was necessary for Barth to, as always, swim against the stream and warn the West against the divinisation of the Western democratic state and the demonisation of the Eastern socialist state (Jehle 2002:15). Today we find very much the same dangers with the divinisation of the "Christian democratic West" and the demonisation of the "Muslim totalitarian Middle East."

Jehle concedes that Barth might have underestimated Stalin. But Barth did not speak *for* Communism, and he also condemned the horrors committed by Stalin's regime. But rather than speaking out *against* Communism, Barth spoke out against the Western *phobia* for Communism and cheap anti-Communism. Rather than being against Communism, Barth wanted the West to take social questions in full earnest. When asked in 1966 in a TV interview why he did not give such a clear opposition to Communism as to National Socialism, Barth replied that he does not live in a Communist country. Communism is not nearly as dangerous in the West as National Socialism was, because everybody in the West is already against Communism, whereas most Germans accepted National Socialism. Thus Barth, once again, had to swim against the stream (Jehle 2002:88-91). At the same time, however, Barth admonished his friends, Bishop Albert Bereckzy, as well as the Czech, Josef L. Hromadka, for not swimming against the stream in their contexts. Barth admonished them for identifying the newly developing world of freedom and peace with communist leaders, and in this way making exactly the same mistake as the West, namely a natural theology that justifies our political ideologies. In his letters to them, Barth reminded them that as Christians we do not give witness to an anti-communist or to a communist peace, but to the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. Barth understood that in preaching the name of Jesus Christ, we do not orient ourselves to the politically and economically powerful, but very often have to swim against the stream of political and economic influence (Jehle 2002:95-99).

McLean, already in 1981, gave perspective on Barth's apparent "silence" about Communism and also gave a significant allusion to economic powers that tempt the church today, probable more than any political power. McLean says: "Perhaps [Barth] was insufficiently aware of the exploitative nature of Russia's occupation of Hungary (although he opposed Soviet totalitarianism), but the severe attack levelled by Reinhold Niebuhr against Barth's supposed inability to choose between relative goods – communist totalitarianism and modified capitalist democracy – is somewhat tempered through our present awareness of Niebuhr's own theological support of the cold war and of a modified capitalism with its dual expressions of Third World exploitation and the misbehaviour of multinational corporations" (McLean 1981:3).

Both Barth and Metzger emphasise that the church and the state cannot be separated from each other, but that there should always be a clear distinction between the two. Metzger is correct in his critique that in the atheistic socialist state there was just as much a confusion of state and church

as in the first half of the century in Germany, since the state was not merely secular, but was in fact attempting to replace the church's role in society. The state needs the church to be a true church, in order for it to be a truly secular state. I just wonder whether Barth's "silence" was not marked by an even greater danger, namely by the threat of the Western church sanctioning the animosity between the Western and the Eastern states, which had the potential to start a nuclear war. It would have been a far more disastrous confusion of church and state if the church's critique on atheistic socialism gave the Western states a divine mandate to make the East an enemy. In South Africa, this was very much the case. Many of the cruelties of Apartheid were excused by church leaders as a necessary precaution against the "red danger" of communism.

The fact is that to give witness to the free grace of God in Jesus Christ – which neither deifies humanity nor isolates humanity in its secularity – means to continually swim against the stream of the all too human tendency to glorify some and to demonise others. Barth knew this all too well. Therefore, at the end of the Second World War, when everybody began to condemn Germany for everything that happened, Barth had to change direction once again. Jehle explains: "Barth, who, at the end of the thirties and the beginning of the forties, had tirelessly called for resistance – even for armed resistance – against Germany, now interceded politically in a new direction: *even the German people now lying on the ground deserve to be treated humanely* and not with utter vindictiveness. In his lecture in Durrenroth, Barth said that Jesus Christ, 'the reconciliation of our sins,' was also meant for Germans, '*even for that unhappy man in whose name all the horrors of these years have been summed up.*' Barth refers here to Adolf Hitler, against whom, three days earlier, on 20 July 1944, an unsuccessful assassination attempt had been made" (Jehle 2002:82).

In Barth's discussion of the Christian life, Barth uses the Our Father prayer as the basis for his understanding of Christian ethics. In this fascinating work, Barth shows that true Christian witness can neither view the world as inherently evil or as inherently good, but only as the object of God's free grace. Hauerwas puts it well: "According to Barth, there are two extremes that must be ruled out as Christian responses to the 'worldliness' of the world: first, the negative view of the world that results in either monasticism or the crusade; second, the positive view of the world that, on the basis of the correct notion that the world has already been reconciled to God in Christ, simply accepts the secularity of the world by way of the Christian 'approximation and assimilation' of the attitudes and languages of the world. Both alternatives are closed to the Christian because each in its own way entails the loss of the humility, modesty, and courage that must characterise Christian witness" (Hauerwas 2001, 2002:201-202).

6. THE HUMANISATION OF HUMANITY

Barth's focus upon the Creator rather than the creature can be misunderstood as a pessimistic view of humanity, but instead of being either pessimistic or optimistic, it is a realistic, yet hopeful view of humanity. Barth says that we are afraid to emphasise the divinity and righteousness of God alone, not because we think too much of humanity, but because we think *too little* of God! We can not believe that God is powerful enough to start something radically new in and among us, and thus we try to stretch out towards God with our own tower of Babel, our own righteousness, morality, state, civilisation, culture or religion. Barth says: "Is it not remarkable that the greatest atrocities of life – I think of the capitalistic order and of the war – can justify themselves on purely moral principles? The devil may also make use of morality. He laughs at the tower of Babel which we erect to him" (Barth 1928:17-22). In this way, humanity is dehumanised, by putting its trust in humanity rather than in God. Barth continues: "We ought to apply ourselves with all our strength to expect more from God, to let grow within us that which he will in fact cause to grow, to accept what indeed he constantly offers us, watching and praying that we may respond to his original

touch. As children to take joy in the great God and his righteousness, and to trust all to him! *Have we joy enough?*” (Barth 1928:25).

Jungel, in following Barth, tries to walk the fine line between deifying humanity and isolating humanity from God within the secular sphere. Jungel asks the crucial question whether the divinity of Christ is not a deficiency in the humanity of Christ, which makes Christ an unattainable ideal for the rest of humanity? Since the rest of humanity is certainly not divine or semi-divine, and since we should always guard against the false claim that we are divine, does Christ’s divinity not isolate us from God? Jungel finds his answer in Barth’s description of the simultaneous and inseparable humiliation of God and exaltation of humanity in the incarnation. The humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ are not two separate, sequential movements, but rather two corresponding movements, which emphasise both the qualitative difference *and* the graceful reconciliation between God and humanity (Jungel 1986:134).

Although it may seem to many people that Barth’s theology has a limited view of humanity, since Barth so adamantly stressed the deity of God alone and so fiercely rejected any form of divinity in humanity, it is actually a theology that ultimately affirms humanity and gives the space for humanity’s true freedom and joy. Metzger explains: “For [Barth] steers a course between the uncritical *identification* of Christ with culture and the polarisation of them. And in the place of either the *deification* of culture or the *secularisation* of it ..., one witnesses in Barth’s theology the *humanisation* of the creaturely domain whereby humanity is free to go about its tasks, free ‘to become a little more human.’ One is now free to laugh in all seriousness, for hope is now firmly based in the incarnate reality of the divine Word” (Metzger 2003:225-226).

Barth denies any possibility of a union or synthesis between God and humanity in this world. In the second edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth followed the atheistic church historian, Franz Overbeck’s denial that the Christian faith can be mediated through nature or history as it is done in liberal theology. Unlike Overbeck, however, this does not signal for Barth the impossibility of Christian existence in this world, but rather a hopeful existence, a pilgrimage towards the Promised Land. In the impossibility of stretching out towards God through religion, Barth did not see despair, but the beginning of God’s possibility, not as one possibility among others, but as the impossible possibility, the absolute miracle of the faithfulness of God towards humanity (Jungel 1986:62).

In his lecture “Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century,” Barth says, to the surprise of many: “ ‘Theology,’ in the literal sense, means the science and doctrine of God. A very precise definition of the Christian endeavour in this respect would really require the more complex term ‘The-anthropology.’ For an abstract doctrine of God has no place in the Christian realm, only a ‘doctrine of God and of man,’ a doctrine of the commerce and communion between God and man” (Barth 1960:9). Although Barth fervently rejects the idea that the Bible is merely human thoughts about God, i.e. a description of the faith of humanity, he does not mean to say that the Bible is God’s thoughts alone, isolated from humanity. The Bible, for Barth, is God’s thoughts *about humanity*. These thoughts are veiled in human words, culture and language, but yet they are *God’s* thoughts. And not just any thoughts, but God’s thoughts about humanity; God’s thoughts incarnated in the human, Jesus Christ (Barth 1928:43).

For Barth, knowledge of the humanity of God is not something different than knowledge of the deity of God, but precisely an even better understanding of the deity of God than before (Barth 1960:34,38). Through the years it became more and more clear to Barth that what makes God “wholly other” than humanity, is not God’s distance from or rejection of humanity, but rather God’s nearness to, and free election of humanity. “We viewed this ‘wholly other’ in isolation, abstracted and absolutised, and set it over against man, this miserable wretch – not to say boxed his ears with it – in such fashion that it continually showed greater similarity to the deity of the

God of the philosophers than to the deity of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Barth 1960:41). Barth concedes that earlier in his life it eluded him that the *deity* of the *living* God finds its power and meaning in the history and dialogue between God and humanity. God’s otherness lies precisely in God’s togetherness with humanity. Therefore, God’s deity does not exclude, but includes God’s humanity (Barth 1960:42).

The implications of the humanity of God are far reaching for how we view the rights and dignity of every single human being. Barth says: “On the basis of the eternal will of God we have to think of every *human being*, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus Christ is Brother and God is Father; and we have to deal with him on this assumption.” Barth continues: “On the basis of the knowledge of the humanity of God no other attitude to any kind of fellow man is possible. It is identical with the practical acknowledgement of his human rights and his human dignity. To deny it to him would be for us to renounce having Jesus Christ as Brother and God as Father” (Barth 1960:50). Already in 1911, in a lecture in Safenwil on the relationship between Jesus and the social movement, Barth commented that you cannot climb lower on the social ladder than Jesus. One of the surest things of the Gospel is that Jesus identified with the poor and the lowly. Not one human being was too low for Jesus. God’s love did not descend from heaven downwards, but erupted in Jesus Christ from the very bottom of humanity to the top (Jehle 2002:32).

From very early in his life, Barth also understood that God’s concern for humanity is not merely for the salvation of our souls, but for the renewal of our earthly, bodily life. In his lecture, mentioned above, Barth explained that spirit and matter, heaven and earth, do not describe two different worlds, but are part of the one reality of the Kingdom of God. God’s Kingdom *comes to us* in matter and on earth, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, so that our earthly, bodily life can be renewed. The antithesis of God is not the earth or matter, but the evil powers that wish to separate our earthly life from God (Jehle 2002:33). These early statements by Barth are significant, since it shows how his confrontation with the struggle of labourers in his parish already made him critical, even before 1914, of his modern theological schooling, which placed a lot of emphasis on the “inner life” of Jesus and the corresponding inner experience of faith in the individual believer. In a Bible study in Münster on Romans 12, in 1926, Barth lays out his discovery in the past decade, namely that there is no contrast between spirit and nature, soul and body, in the New Testament. According to the Apostle Paul, there is no part of humanity which is not completely sinful, but simultaneously, there is no part of humanity which God does not reconcile and redeem. In God’s grace God renews and claims every aspects of humanity (Jehle 2002:33-34).

Thus, Metzger’s concludes: “Barth’s theology, a theology driven by the love and freedom of the triune God who creates and preserves, elects and addresses humanity in and through the person of the Word, Jesus Christ, safeguards the *distinction* between God and the world, Christianity and broader culture, while also *connecting* the two spheres, the divine and human, sacred and secular, in an integral manner. In this way, it serves well those in the church who would speak out against the ever-present threats of the divinisation and secularisation of culture in favour of a culture that is truly human” (Metzger 2003:233). In this way Barth’s theology remains realistic, yet full of hope. Barth’s theology is able to affirm the relationship between Christ and culture “not with naive optimism or scathing pessimism, but with boundless hope, based not on culture’s achievements, but in view of culture’s goal, when the redeeming Word of eschatological promise renews the world” (Metzger 2003:233-234).

7. CONCLUSION

With growing tension in the world today between different nations, cultures and sub-cultures, the church should strive towards furthering tolerance between these different cultures, because Jesus

Christ is God's Word of grace spoken to all of humanity, to every culture. Of course the church should do much more than tolerate people, we should unconditionally accept them, invite them in with hospitality, help them when they are in need, forgive them when they wrong us and love them with the love of God, but if we can not tolerate them for who and what they are, if we can not respect their dignity as creatures of God, then all of the above will be impossible. If we have a proper theology of nature, and not a natural theology, we will not judge some cultures as "better" than other cultures because we can see some inherent goodness in them, or because we see the hand of God in their historic development, but we will view all cultures as equally unrighteous before the *krisis* of God and at the same time equally righteous through the reconciling and redeeming Word of the Creator, Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ the Creator chose to be in an inseparable relation to all of creation, despite the Creator's distinct otherness to all of creation. Through God's gracious incarnation in Jesus Christ, the Creator says: "It is good," to every culture, every human, every creature, thereby giving dignity to all of creation, despite its fallenness, sinfulness and brokenness. As church we can not do anything but the same. Not by claiming inherent goodness in creation or by attempting to see the will of God in its historic movement, but by respecting and enjoying all of creation for what it is, namely God's creation, by claiming and affirming the reconciliation between Creator and all creatures in Jesus Christ, and by expecting and praying for the redemption of all of creation through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, we will give a proper witness, not to creation, but to the Creator.

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KONTAKBESONDERHEDE

Ds MS Van Zyl

Biccard 2

Biccardstraat

7551 DURBANVILLE

Selfoonno: 083 289 4985

E-pos: tinusvz@durbanvillegemeente.co.za