

***Christen Gemeinde, Bürgergemeinden, Migranten,  
Aktiengesellschaften, Finanzmärkte ...***  
**Towards a decolonial reconfiguration of Karl Barth's  
theological politics for contemporary Europe**

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**Abstract**

The thesis of this article is that the arrival and non-arrival of African migrants fractures the pseudo innocence of Western Europe exposing its colonial entanglements hence challenging the church to develop a decolonial theological politics. The article develops such a politics by re-examining and reconfiguring elements of Barth's theological politics. It draws on his understanding of the "lordless powers" and of God taking the side of the poor and rereads them in the light of a counter imperial reading of the New Testament. This forms the basis for a reconfiguring of themes from his Christian Community and Civil Community.

**Keywords**

*Karl Barth; decoloniality; theological politics; church and state*

## **1. Introduction**

The arrival in Europe of millions of migrants, fleeing war, poverty, ecological disaster, dictatorial rule, and political instability has been described as a crisis of migration – focusing on the presence of those who are other, or as a crisis of solidarity – focusing on the rejection experienced by the migrants. It is more accurately described as a crisis of innocence. For those with eyes to see the crisis fractures the pseudo innocence of Western Europe countries. Its dark depths are laid bare in the death of thousands in the waters of the Mediterranean and on the Sands of the Sahara as a consequence of European migration policies and practices. The emptiness

of Europe's myth of cultural superiority is exposed in the thousands of women and children forced into prostitution to satisfy the sexual appetites of European men. The hidden reality of the crisis is the millions of family members who never attempt the journey but who wait in hope that their relatives will soon be sending them the financial support they need to survive. The arrival and non-arrival of migrating people is a component of an interrelated complex of socio-political dynamics. The exploitative forces created through colonial and neo-colonial exploitation have developed a life of their own interacting with the power of transnational companies and financial institutions. The crisis challenges the nations of Western Europe to come acknowledge and respond to their culpability in the colonial, neo-colonial, and post-colonial exploitation of Africa and Asia. As Barth notes in his *Ethics* lectures:

When members of the white race all enjoy every possible intellectual and material advantage on the basis of the superiority of one race and the subjection of many other races, and of the use our race has made of both, I myself may not have harmed a single hair on the heads of Africans or Indians. I may be very friendly toward them. I may be a supporter of missions. Yet I am still a member of the white race which, as a whole, has obviously used very radically the possibility of appropriation in relation to them. My share in the sin against Africa or Asia for the last hundred or fifty years may be very remote or indirect, but would Europe be what it is, and would I be what I am, if that expansion had never happened?<sup>1</sup>

More particularly this crisis of innocence poses a fundamental challenge to the way European Christians and churches understand their identity and witness. Can they come to terms with their colonial entanglements and chart a new decolonial theological politics that enables them to bear faithful witness to the crucified Christ in contemporary Europe? Barth's classic portrait of the relation between church and state, *The Christian Community and the Civil Community* makes a significant contribution to such an endeavour.

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1 Karl Barth, *Ethics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 164-165

## 2. Decolonial critique and theological politics

The descriptor “decolonial” is vulnerable to the critique of introducing an ideologically determined political theology that contradicts the core of Barth’s theology. The use of the descriptor is however qualified. Firstly, the “decolonial” does not refer to a coherent ideology. It refers to diverse intellectual insurgencies which expose and counter the narratives that obscure the dehumanization that arises from the complex interrelated systems of oppression, domination, and exploitation which were and are the murky underside of modernity and post modernity.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, this article develops a distinctively theological decoloniality will be developed through the reconfiguring aspects of Barth’s theological politics from the perspective of a counter imperial reading of the New Testament.

### The colonial and the lordless powers

The dominant European narratives obscure the realities endured by the colonial victims whose exploitation provided the material base of European modernity. Barth’s theology of the lordless powers opens the way for an alternative narrative in which exposes this exploitation and provides a key component in the development of a theological decoloniality. The lordless powers are the forces unleashed by human rebellion against God’s lordship. They are human capacities which, when exercised in rebellion against God, acquire an independence and in turn dominate and enslave humanity. They influence and master human thought, speech, and action.

They are not just the supports but the motors of society. They are the secret guarantee of man’s great and small conventions, customs, habits, traditions, and institutions. They are the hidden wirepullers in man’s great and small enterprises, movements, achievements, and revolutions. They are not just the potencies but the real facts and agents of human progress, regress, and stagnation in politics, economics, scholarship, technology, and art ...<sup>3</sup>

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2 See Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2018)

3 Karl Barth, *The Christian Life* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 303.

The powers are concealed background forces and part of their power lies in their hiddenness. The recognition of the role of the powers does not in any way remove human responsibility.

Barth description of three powers provides the basis for a theological reading of coloniality. The first is “Leviathan”: this is power unleashed by the use of governmental power not for the good of humanity but to oppress and exploit them. State power dominates and controls the people for the purpose of maintaining and extending its own interests, influence, power, and perpetuity. Even when rulers believe themselves to be directing the institutions of government the power that they claim to wield intoxicates and possesses them so that they serve its extension. Barth thus describes “the idea of ‘empire’” as the “demonism of politics ... which is always inhuman.”<sup>4</sup>

The second is “Mammon”: this emerges when the human ability to control and use material resources for the flourishing of human life becomes a goal in itself. The pursuit of resources becomes the driving power that exploits human beings, promotes conflicts, and dominates societies. The power of “Mammon” is intensified when it works in dynamic partnership with “Leviathan”.

A third group of powers are ideologies – the intellectual constructs or grand narratives, that we use to understand and interpret the world. These provide the coordinates for human life in its various dimensions providing the motives and goals for human activity. They become lordless powers when they attain the status of undisputed normativity demanding our total loyalty. Their power lies in their transformation from being acknowledged as human conceptualizations of reality to being identified with truth and reality. Ideologies working with “Mammon” and “Leviathan” shape human history.

Barth’s description of the lordless powers is incomplete and open to critique. In particular the relationship between his theological description of the powers and sociological descriptions of institutional and social power requires further exploration. He, however, understands the powers to operate through and perhaps take concrete form in social structures

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4 *Christian Life*, 308.

and institutions. Colonialism has taken diverse forms through history, is theologically the expression of diverse configurations of “Leviathan” and “Mammon” which have dominated and exploited people for the perpetuation and flourishing of the colonial states and institutions. Coloniality as the narrative that has shaped, determined, and then obscured this systematic domination is an express of the power of ideology.

The ultimate defeat of the lordless powers will be accomplished by the final coming of kingdom of God. Christians as those who are commanded to pray for the coming of the kingdom are called into a life or revolt against the oppressive and exploitative power of the lordless powers. Hence, if colonialism and coloniality are manifestations of lordless powers then decolonial insurgency is a praxis which corresponds with and is required by the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom.

### **The God who takes the side of the rejected**

The centrality of revolt against the oppression of the lordless powers is emphasised by Barth’s affirmation of God’s particular relationship with the victims of the abuse of power. Describing God’s righteousness/justice he affirms that:

God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who always enjoyed right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.<sup>5</sup>

Similar affirmations can be found scattered throughout Barth’s writings, however their significance lies not in their frequency but in Barth’s theological grounding of them. Barth refers to biblical passages that emphasise God’s concern for the poor, but they gain new significance when viewed christologically. Jesus is born, lives and dies as a poor and forsaken person. In his life his companions are the poor, the rejected, and the lowly. His miracles are acts of compassion to end the suffering of people not because of their worthiness but purely because they are suffering. His teaching rejected the accumulation of wealth and blesses the deprived. This life and activity of the human Jesus has ultimate significance for Jesus:

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5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II.1 (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1932-68), 386.

... exists analogously to the mode of existence of God. In what he thinks and wills and does, in his attitude, there is a correspondence, a parallel in the creaturely world, to the plan and purpose and work and attitude of God.<sup>6</sup>

In the life and activity of Jesus, God is revealed as the One who is not only for human beings but in a particular way for and with the vulnerable, the deprived, the marginalised, and the victims. This is an expression of the gracious and merciful character of God. When this understanding of the character and command of God is placed in the centre of theological politics then a de-colonial response to the crisis of European innocence is an analogy that corresponds to the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

### The counter imperial reading of the New Testament

A theological decoloniality has third root in the counter imperial reading of the New Testament. Barth stated: “The Apostles, in the face of the Roman Empire ... had nothing either positive or negative to say.” In contrast, contemporary counter imperial readings of the New Testament have argued that it is impossible to understand the New Testament unless it is viewed against the pervasive presence of Roman imperial power.<sup>7</sup>

The New Testament uses of images and motifs are drawn from imperial ideology and propaganda to articulate its understanding of the significance of Jesus, and the identity and mission of the church. In doing so, they depict God’s purpose as the establishment of a counter movement to the Roman Imperium with an alternative way of living in the world. The readers are constantly presented with the challenge of following the ways of Caesar or the ways of Christ.

The centre of the New Testament proclamation is the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. The one who is proclaimed to be Lord is the one who was a victim of Roman imperial power. The radical socio-critical

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6 *Church Dogmatics* IV:2, 166.

7 There is a vast amount of literature, see for example Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), Joerg Rieger, *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), Klaus Wengst, *Pax Roma and them Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1987), Adam Winn (ed.), *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016).

significance this cannot be underestimated. Crucifixion was the ritualised humiliation and subjugation of a person deemed to be an enemy of the empire through a public torturous death. It was the ruthless affirmation of the supreme power of the empire in the face of those who had the audacity to rebel against its authority. The New Testament writers proclaim that one who had been so degraded and rejected by the imperial power had been affirmed by God as the ultimate Lord who would judge the nations. They placed the re-presentation of his degrading death and hope for his coming at the centre of their communal life through the ritual of breaking bread and drinking wine.

As Barth states, we must seek the command of God “only in what happened in Bethlehem, at Capernaum and Tiberias, in Gethsemane and on Golgotha, and in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea.”<sup>8</sup> In seeking the command in the life, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus we are confronted with one who lived on the margins of the Roman Empire, who was a member of subjugated people, who became the victim of a show trial resulting in torturous death. This one who experienced the depth of colonial repression was declared by the resurrection to be the ultimate revelation God in history. It is from him that we hear the command of God a command that rejects all forms of oppression and exploitation.

### 3. Re-examining the Community of Christians and the Community of citizens

Barth’s understanding of the relationship between the church and the state developed and changed. His intended discussion of the relationship in the ethics of reconciliation was never written, however, *The Christian Community and the Civil Community* provides a helpful framework for examining aspects of his thought.

#### The Community of Christians

Barth describes the “Community of Christians” as:

... the commonality of people in one place, region, or country  
who are called apart and gathered as Christians by reason of their

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8 *Church Dogmatics* II.2, 559.

knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ. The meaning and purpose of this “assembly” (*ecclesia*) is the common life of these people in one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, that is, in obedience to the Word of God in Jesus Christ ... The have come together in order to pass on the Word to others. The ... outward expression is the Confession by which they all stand, their jointly exercised responsibility of preaching of the name of Jesus Christ to all men and the worship and thanksgiving which they offer together ... every single Christian community is ... an ecumenical (catholic) fellowship, that is, at one with Christian Communities in all places, regions, and lands.<sup>9</sup>

This resonates with the missional ecclesiology of CD IV:3 which states:

... by entrusting to it the ministry of His prophetic Word and therefore the provisional representation of the calling of all humanity and indeed of all creatures as it has taken place in Him. He does this by sending it among the peoples as His own people, ordained for its part to confess Him before all men, to call them to Him and thus to make known to whole World that the covenant between God and man concluded in him is the first and final meaning of its history, and that the His future manifestation is already here and now its great, effective and living hope.<sup>10</sup>

For the purpose of this article the following is of importance:

First, Barth’s focus is on the church in a given “place, region, or country” but he goes on to note that it is at one with other Christian communities in “all places, regions, and lands”. To be part of a particular Christian community is simultaneously to participate in a more extensive community that transcends local, regional, and national boundaries. The local community is the expression of the universal community. CD IV:3 strengthens this by arguing that Christians are firstly members of this new people and then secondly members of particular nations. Their first responsibility and loyalty are to act as Christians and this takes precedence over their

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9 Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 150.

10 *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.2, 681.



loyalties and responsibilities to the particular state to which they belong.<sup>11</sup> The message and mission of a church is never the promotion of a particular culture or national interest. This transnational character gains intensified significance from a counter imperial reading of Colossians 3:11 which describes a community that includes barbarians and Scythians – who the embodiment of being beyond the boundaries of the “civilised” empire.<sup>12</sup> The transnational character of the church places it in the intersection of the contradictory dynamics of globalisation and nationalism and must be central to any contemporary theology of the church and the states. A local community of Christians always stands in relation to a particular state as a participant in the transnational community of Christians.

Second, the community of Christians is an *ecclesia* – a word from the political sphere – an “assembly” gathered for the purpose making decisions about the life and activities of the community.<sup>13</sup> This “assembly” gathers in to make decisions under the Lordship of Jesus Christ who is “the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”<sup>14</sup> Churches gathered in all places affirm this one Word over all other words, this one Lord over all other lords whether these are the political, social, economic, or cultural words or lords. Yet they are to hear this one Word as it is addressed to their concrete social, political, cultural and economic contexts. They dare not “place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes, and plans”<sup>15</sup> nor “hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.”<sup>16</sup> This Word is the crucified one – the victim of imperial injustice.

Third, the church bears witness to the reign of God through which came life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and which will come in its

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11 See *Church Dogmatics* IV.3.2, 59 & 899.

12 See Harry O. Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Letters* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 63-102.

13 The German *Versammlung* is often used in this context.

14 *Barmen Declaration*, 1; translation by Douglas Bax reprinted in Charles Villa Vicencio, *Between Christ and Caesar: Classic and Contemporary Texts on Church and State* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1986), 97-98.

15 *Barmen Declaration*, 6.

16 *Barmen Declaration*, 3.

fullness at the *Parousia*. Its witness points back to the past revelation and points to the future when the significance of the past will be completely revealed. It confesses that the world was reconciled to God and that this reconciliation is the hope of the world. This witness proclaims the reign of God revealed in Jesus Christ as it addresses the concrete context of the present.

True witnessing to Jesus Christ occurs in the unity of two things, a definite repetition of the confession of Him as the one who has come to us as the Son of God and Saviour and will come again, and the actualising of this confession in definite decisions relating to those contemporary questions which agitate the Church and the world.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, the message that the community proclaims is that God is revealed in Jesus Christ as being for human beings. The life and ministry of the church is, thus, always for the concrete good of human beings. The community always acts and lives in solidarity with the world. This solidarity has a particular focus on those who suffer. To claim to be a Christian and not to live with and for other human beings is a contradiction in terms. Particularly expressed in the diaconal ministry where the church “explicitly accepts its solidarity with the least of the little ones ... with those who are in obscurity and are not seen, with those who are pushed to the margins and perhaps the very outer margins of the life of human society”;<sup>18</sup> it is central to the identity of the church.

The Church is witness of the fact that the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that – casting all false impartiality aside – the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened will always be the object of its primary concern ...<sup>19</sup>

Fifth, the church is a community which prays “Your kingdom come” is thus praying that God:

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17 Karl Barth, *The Church and the Political Problem of our Day* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), 12.

18 *Church Dogmatics* IV 3.2, 891.

19 *Community, State, and Church*, 173.

... will cause his justice/righteousness to appear and dwell on a new earth and a new heaven. Meanwhile they act in accordance with their prayer as people who are responsible for the rule of human justice/righteousness, that is, for the preservation and renewal, the deepening and extending, of the divinely ordained human safeguards of human rights, human freedom, and peace on earth.<sup>20</sup>

The church is waiting for the coming of God's reign, but this waiting is an active waiting that hastens toward the coming kingdom, "they do not look toward it but run toward it as fast as their feet will carry them."<sup>21</sup> The church does not establish God's reign. God's reign occurred in the concrete life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and will occur again at the *Parousia*. It is a new thing that stands in discontinuity with all human action. But in praying for the coming of God's reign of justice the church is called to live, act and speak in a way that corresponds to God's coming reign within the limitations, and complexity of human societies. Such correspondence entails the rejection of all injustice, corruption, and oppression and a revolt against their presence and activity in the world. It includes concrete actions of justice and mercy that promote the well-being of human beings. This is human justice/righteousness not divine justice/righteousness; it is limited, fallible, and subject to revision. It is action for concrete human beings and not the promotion of ideologies which end using and oppressing real human beings in the pursuit of their ultimate goal.

The starting point for a reconfigured understanding of the relationship between the church and actual states must start with the renewal of the church. As the church must rediscover its identity and mission as a witness to the coming of God's reign in the Jesus Christ and from this determine its concrete political stance and relationship with existing governments and structures of social power.

### The Communities of Citizens – (Bürgergemeinde)

Barth describes the community of citizens as:

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20 *Christian Life*, 287 I have altered the translation righteousness to justice/righteousness to more adequately convey the semantic range of the German "Gerechtigkeit".

21 *Christian Life*, 369.

The commonalty of all the people in one place, region, or country in so far as they belong together under a constitutional system of government that is equally valid for and binding on them all, and which is defended and maintained by force. The meaning of this mutual association ... is the safeguarding of both the external, relative, and provisional freedom of the individuals and the external and relative peace of their community and to that extent the safe guarding of the external, relative, and provisional humanity of their life both as individuals and as a community.<sup>22</sup>

The English translation of *Bürgergemeinde* as civic community is totally inadequate. Barth, as he notes, is using a “*Helvetizismus*”<sup>23</sup> – a *Bürgergemeinde* is a particular Swiss political structure that existed in most Swiss cantons from the end of the Napoleonic era into the twentieth century. It no longer exists in many (but not all) parts of Switzerland. Every Swiss citizen is firstly a citizen of a particular town. The town of citizenship is not identical with place of residence or birth but is determined by descent unless one changes one’s place of citizenship. The “residential community” is the local government structure made up of the residents of the town responsible for the running of the town. The *Bürgergemeinde* is made up of the citizens of the town who are resident there. While there are variations, the *Bürgergemeinde* had responsibility for three main areas. First, the ownership of communal property to be used for the benefit of the citizens. Second, the social welfare and security of the citizens (not the residents) of the town. When citizens, resident in another town were in need they were sent to their place of citizenship, and the *Bürgergemeinde* there was responsible for taking care of them. Third, the *Bürgergemeinde* was responsible for *Einbürgerung* the process of becoming a citizen. Barth’s use of the term *Bürgergemeinde* emphasises that the state is a community of citizens who are mutually responsibility for each other’s well-being.

Certain elements of Barth’s description are relevant for this article.

Firstly, a state is a community of mutual responsibility for the acts of the state. In his discussion of the death penalty and of war Barth argues that

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22 *Community, State, and Church*, 150.

23 Karl Barth, *Rechtfertigung und Recht; Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde; Evangelium und Gesetz*, (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1988), 47.

the citizens are not mere spectators but are involved directly or indirectly in the action of the state and hence are responsible for it. He states:

The state is not a strange, lofty and powerful hypostasis suspended over the individual, dominating him, and thinking, willing and deciding for him. To be sure individuals are included in its jurisdiction and brought under its authority. Individuals are protected by it and owe allegiance to it. Yet in the very same process it is they who support and maintain it. Enjoying its relative protections, they also share, even if only by their silence or inaction, in its imperfections. They bear responsibility for its condition, and for what is done or not done by it.<sup>24</sup>

Second, the state is focused on the well-being of its members. Barth here refers to “freedom” and “humanity”. He states in “The Christian Community in the Midst of Political Change” – “A proper State will be one in which the concepts of order, freedom, community, power and responsibility are balanced in equal proportions, where none of these elements is made an absolute dominating others.”<sup>25</sup> In other contexts he refers to “order, justice and freedom”<sup>26</sup>. These are important because the right balance between them supports the “normal task of the state” that is “maintaining and fostering life”.<sup>27</sup> This involves both the negative aspect of protecting people from arbitrary violations of freedom in the spheres of religion, family life, science etc., and the positive promoting of the well-being of the citizens. He argued that “the righteous state contradicts and withstands all political, social, and economic tyranny and anarchy”<sup>28</sup>. The state must set boundaries for all its inhabitants to protect them from that which would destroy their lives. It is required to enforce those boundaries against all who would attempt to evade or transgress them. The boundaries also divide one state from another. “The *polis* has walls.”<sup>29</sup>

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24 *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 464.

25 Karl Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946-52*, (London: SCM, 1954), 95.

26 Karl Barth, *The Church and the War*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 39.

27 *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 458.

28 *Church and the War*, 39.

29 *Community, State, and Church*, 151.

Third, Barth's understanding of the state provides a basis for evaluating particular governments. Not all governments exhibit the qualities of the true state. The extent to which they do determines whether or not they qualify to be a state. The mere wielding of political power and coercive force does not turn a governing institution into a state. Barth argued that the Nazi government was "anarchy tempered by tyranny, or tyranny tempered by anarchy, but certainly no State."<sup>30</sup> In many cases a given government both obscures and reveals aspects of being a true state with some states displaying greater levels of justice and freedom than others. It is this mixed character that requires the responsible action of citizens to move it in the direction of greater levels of justice and freedom. This also means that genuine respect for and submission to the state requires criticism of and opposition to particular governments that obscure the ideal of the true just state.

Fourth, Barth's understanding of the state as a community of citizens raises the question of the relationship between the nation and the state. In his discussion of "Near and Distant Neighbours" Barth recognises the significance of being part of a particular community, that speaks a particular language, and that has its home in a particular geographical location. Human beings have a particular loyalty to those who are like them. God's command addresses people in the particularity of their own context. However, he strongly rejects any attempt to absolutize the nation. Nations are the product of human history, their boundaries are fluid, and they are enriched by the presence of interaction with those from beyond their borders. To be human involves not only loyalty to one's own but openness to those from without. There is no divine command that gives existence to particular nations nor gives them particular missions. Nationhood is not an order of creation. Jesus Christ as the centre and goal of all history is the common centre and goal of all national histories. The command of God revealed in Jesus Christ always directs people beyond their own group to all of humanity. The people who are obedient to the command unite within themselves the tension of loyalty to their own people with an openness to all humanity.

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30 *Church and the Political Problem*, 55.

One's own people in its location cannot and must not be a wall but a door. Whether it be widely opened or not, and even perhaps shut again, it must never be barred, let alone blocked up. The one who is really in his own people, amongst those near to him, is always on the way to those more distant, to other peoples.<sup>31</sup>

The identity of the state does not derive from the nation. The nation state is a modern invention and different forms of the state have and do exist.<sup>32</sup> The state exists in response to a specific command of God in Jesus Christ the nation does not.

Lastly, states are part of God's gracious response to human sin and have a Christological foundation. Barth expounded this in "The Church and State" (*Rechtfertigung und Recht*). Here he interprets the accounts of Jesus before Pilate to make three points. First, Jesus recognises and affirms that Pilate has been given power by God. Hence the authority of the state comes from God even when it is misused for unjust purposes. Second, Pilate had the possibility of releasing Jesus and therefore of acknowledging his kingship thus granting the legal right to proclaim the gospel. Third, Pilate ordered the crucifixion, although this was unjust, under divine providence it became the means of justification. The state, whether it acts justly or unjustly, is constrained by God to promote good in general and to create the space for the proclamation of the justification.

Barth develops his Christological foundation further with his theology of the powers. Human governments are representatives of "angelic" powers created through and for Christ and who despite their rebellion against God will be brought into submission to Christ. The rebellious character of the powers results in the emergence of the "demonic" state. However, their submission has already been achieved in the death and resurrection of Christ so that even in their rebellion they cannot escape the boundaries of their original order.

The third aspect of Barth's Christological foundation for the state is the pervasive use of political language to describe the church and the eschatological future. The ultimate true state is God's eschatological reign;

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31 *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 294.

32 *Church and the War*, 22.

Christians are citizens of this state; and the church bears witness to it. However, this is also the eschatological destiny of all human states and this destiny provides for evaluating the state. The state, as state, is unaware of this destiny but the church bears witness to it in its proclamation of justification so that the eschatological *polis* illuminates the earthly *polis*.

This Christological foundation provides Barth with the theological basis for evaluating particular states. Because the state is an order of God's grace, one of the powers created in and for Christ and which will ultimately be taken up into God's eschatological reign Barth can speak of a true state as which transcends individual states. The individual human state is "in its sphere is in itself that essentially international, God-instituted true State."<sup>33</sup> The diverse individual states only give partial and incomplete expression. Hence, the Christological foundation requires the discerning and critical evaluation of particular existing states.

#### **4. Centres, circles, and margins: Reconfiguring the relationships between the Community of Christians and the Community of Citizens**

In *The Christian Community and the Civil Community* Barth developed his christological image of the state and the relationship between the church and the state with his model of two concentric circles with Christ at the centre, the church as the inner circle and the state as the outer circle. The crisis of European innocence exposes certain inadequacies in this geometrical model that require a reconfiguration of the relationship between the two communities in the light of the decolonial theological insurgency proposed in the first section of this article.

##### **Circles and ellipses**

The model of concentric circles does not adequately describe the realities of contemporary Europe. Western European states ascribe to the ideal of being democratic institutions directed toward the benefit of their citizens. Yet residing within them are significant numbers of people who are not citizens with varying degrees of participation in the state, its benefits, and

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33 *Church and the War*, 23.



its decision making. The community of citizens has boundaries that do not coincide with the borders of the state. While these boundaries are to a certain extent porous and fuzzy, they exclude and marginalise.

The Western European states owe their prosperity and power to their historic involvement in colonialism and their continued participation in diverse forms of neo-colonial exploitation and domination. The benefits that the citizens enjoy arising from the exploitative relationships with communities beyond the borders of the state and the boundaries of the communities of citizens. It is the victims of this exploitation who are attempting to participate in the benefits exploitation by migrating to Europe. The community of citizens does not only not coincide with the borders of the state, but its power also extends beyond the borders to exploit and dominate others.

In a given state the church includes those who are not citizens and hence are subjected to marginalisation and exclusion. Local communities of Christians participate in the transnational church. Hence the church is not an inner circle within the greater circle of the community of citizens but rather an ellipse whose boundaries extend beyond a given community of citizens to include those who have been marginalised, exploited, and oppressed by that community.

There is a further set of circles or ellipses created by the globalised economy – *Finanzmärkte* (Financial Markets) and *Aktiengesellschaften* (joint stock companies) – the institutional structures designed to maximise profits for investors and those who manage the investments. Christians and citizens participate in them either directly or more often indirectly through investment and pension funds. Yet unless one owns significant stock in a company one has no influence on the company. Many Christians and citizens are employed by these institutions. Governments and churches are also participants in these structures. They have a major impact on the community of citizens as they seek to shape, direct, and curtail the power of governments in order to maximise their profits. Governments are coerced or seduced into adopting policies, and laws that favour markets and companies, but which often are not beneficial to their citizens, particularly those with less political and economic power. The result is the reduction of the power of democratic decision making so that the community of citizens serves the interests of shareholders who may

or may not be citizens. Governments also act politically and militarily to protect the interests of transnational companies based in their countries. They are further interacting circles which interact with each other and with the church and the state. This complex and dynamic interaction of states, financial markets, and companies is at the centre of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. It is the dynamic interrelationship of Leviathan and Mammon in which Mammon is increasingly dominant.

### **Christ the Centre**

In Barth's model Christ is the centre of both the church and the state. Known and witnessed to within the church, and unknown and anonymous within the state. The dialectic of the known and the unknown Christ enables Barth both to affirm the secularity of the state and political witness of the church. The question that we need to address is how Christ is the centre from the perspective of Barth's understanding of God's solidarity with the poor, the lowly and the weak, and the counter imperial reading of the New Testament.

Who is the Christ who is the centre of the church? Historically and in the contemporary context diverse portraits of Christ have been used to legitimate colonial and neo-colonial exploitation, European cultural imperialism, and the rejection of people who are "other". The identification of Christ with the European socio-cultural heritage is an important element within some forms of right-wing populism. These portraits are fundamental distortions of Jesus the wondering Galilean peasant preacher; who lived in solidarity with the poor and the excluded; who acted to relieve their suffering; who proclaimed the reign of God which subverted hierarchies of power, wealth, and honour; who was rejected by the religious and political elite who collaborated with the colonial overlords; and was crucified by the imperial powers. This one was affirmed by God through the resurrection to be Lord who achieved victory not through military conquest but through suffering service and humiliating death. This Lord locates himself amongst, the poor, the lowly, the excluded, the victims, the exploited, and the oppressed. Hence, if he is the centre of the church then the church is not merely a community which includes those who are the victims of the present socio-political order but the one which self-consciously locates itself amongst them and in solidarity with them. Solidarity with and action

on behalf of the victims of oppression and injustice – and in this context colonial and neo-colonial domination and exploitation – are central to the identity of the church as the community gathered around the crucified Christ. It is time for churches to critically re-evaluate their relationship with the European cultural heritage in acknowledgement of its inseparable relationship with the exploitation and domination of those beyond Europe.

Christ is the hidden centre of the state which, as the outer circle, is unaware of this centre. He rejects any attempt to turn the state into a church and thus to become a Christian state. The state is part of the world reconciled to God in Christ and has its ultimate destiny in the coming reign of God. A counter imperial reading the New Testament raises significant challenges to what it means for Christ to be the centre of the state. Jesus' trial before Pilate, particularly in its Johannine version, is not an affirmation of the divine origin of state power but rather a challenge to decide who is the genuine king – Caesar represented by Pilate, or Jesus who is scourged, ridiculed, and crucified.<sup>34</sup> The narrative presents a choice between two different types of power – the power of domination and exploitation or the power of justice through suffering love. Is loyalty to be given to Leviathan or to Christ? Following his trial Jesus is symbolically ejected from the *polis* through his crucifixion outside the city walls as the victim of imperial politics. God's reign comes in the resurrection which announces that the crucified one is the genuine emperor, that true power comes through self-sacrificial service, and that justice is to be evaluated by its solidarity with the victims of state power. The resurrection points to the future coming of God's reign when powers of this earth will be compelled to recognise that the victimized humiliated one is Lord. It is through this acknowledgement that states find their ultimate destiny in the reign of God. The state expresses the purpose for which it was instituted by God when justice for the powerless, the excluded, the rejected, the abused, and the exploited becomes the defining norm of its praxis.

Returning to Barth's model, if the crucified Christ is the centre of church and state it is only as the centre of the state is paradoxically located in

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34 See Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate: Portraits of a Roman Governor*, (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003), Tom Thatcher, *Greater than Caesar: Christology and Empire in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 45-86.

the fractures on the fuzzy borders of the *polis*, amongst those who are the victims of the contemporary socio-cultural and politico-economic order even when they live outside the borders of the state. It is precisely here that the church is called to knowingly locate its centre as it looks back to the presence of God's reign in the resurrection of the crucified and forward to the public coming of God's reign in the *Parousia* of the crucified.

The globalised markets and transnational companies are part of the world reconciled in Christ and in this sense part of the greater circle of creation of which Christ is the centre, but their structural existence is not a response to a divine command. They are ellipses within the broader circle of God's creation which intersect with the church and the community of citizens but do not have their centre in Christ. But they are spheres in which people live under the command of God – a command which:

... is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form, and therefore the championing of the weak against every kind of encroachment on the part of the strong.<sup>35</sup>

### The political mission of the church

The existence of the church as the community centred on the crucified is inherently political. It is constituted in concrete acts, decisions, movements and words that in a fallible and human way are analogies, parables, or reflections of God's reign in relation to the dynamic and multifaceted realities of life in this world. This concrete praxis is a revolt against lordless powers that oppress, exploit, and corrupt human beings, and promotes the well-being of all human beings. This has four dimensions.

The first is the presence of the church as a community that includes those who are the victims of domination, exploitation, and injustice and which locates them in the centre of its life and mission. Those who “are pushed to the very outer margins of the life of human society”<sup>36</sup> – left to drown in the Mediterranean, to dehydrate in the Sahara, or those who never even begin the journey north – are the object of its primary concern and solidarity.

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<sup>35</sup> *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 544.

<sup>36</sup> *Church Dogmatics* IV 3.2, 891.

The second is the prophetic critique of the state from the perspective of the victims – a critique that is expressed in words and actions. An important element in relation to the crisis of European innocence is to create an awareness among European citizens of the extent to which their well-being is a product of colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. This will emphasise that the response to the presence and absence of migrants is not merely hospitality, or even solidarity, but the acknowledgement or European participation in causing the circumstances that have led people to migrate. Deep solidarity and generous hospitality will flow out of such a recognition. A second dimension will be the forthright rejection of populist nationalism particularly when such nationalism claims to be defending Europe's Christian cultural heritage.

The third is the prophetic support of the state when it acts for the benefit of the victims of exploitation, domination, and oppression. In particular this means, negatively, the support of governmental policy and legislation that restricts and opposes the power of Mammon. Positively, it means strengthening and expanding the power of the community of citizens as a community of mutual responsibility to take decisions to direct the economy and the society for the good of all measured by the way the powerless and the excluded are treated. This means strengthening the structures of a given society which protect the well-being and rights of all against the forces of populist nationalism.

The fourth dimension is revolt against the lordless powers as they express themselves in the globalised economy. Through concrete acts the church will resist these lordless powers in its interaction with and participation in institutions of economic power. Positively it will seek to promote alternative ways of organising economic activity that are analogous to the coming reign of God.

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