

Week 3: Christology against history

- ‘Dialectical’ theology was more than just a response to frustration about unsuccessful historical Jesus research.
- Rejection of history as major point of reference for Christology/soteriology.
- Often framed as caused and justified by WW I, but must ultimately be judged by its answers.

1. Søren Abaye Kierkegaard (1831-1855)



Kierkegaard Reading

- Philosophical Fragments (1844). Online at:
<http://sorenkierkegaard.org/texts/text7a.htm>
- Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments (1846)
- P.L. Gardiner, *Kierkegaard*, Oxford 1988
- A. Hannay (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, Cambridge 1997
- J. Howland, *Kierkegaard and Socrates. A Study in Philosophy and Faith*, Cambridge 2006.

Kierkegaard II

- Wholehearted rejection of Hegelian synthesis.
- Dichotomy of faith and knowledge.
- Religious truth is attained as something alien to humans. → Cannot be gained by 'Socratic' method.
- It has to acknowledge sin, the conscious turning away of humans from God.
- Therefore it can only be taught by a teacher who can first change the learner → God himself.

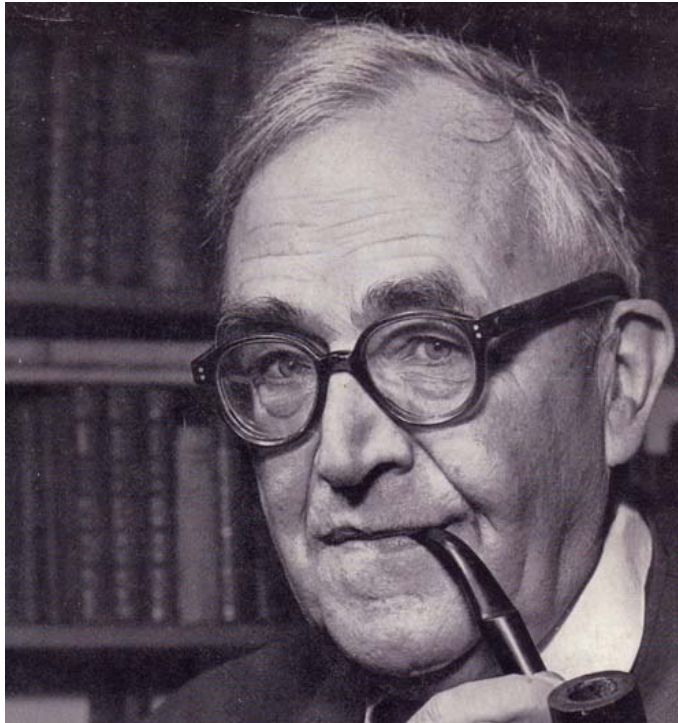
Kierkegaard III

- God must approach the human being as someone like him → Incarnation.
- This is paradoxical, the Absolute Paradox.
- Causes polemical response; only accepted through 'leap' into faith.
- → Faith is always miracle.
- Therefore no difference between 'first' and 'second' disciple.

Kierkegaard IV

- The fascination of this 'Christology' lies in its focus on the utter strangeness of the union of divine and human.
- Also: no 'impartial' Christology possible, only faith will grasp it (intimate connection with existentialist anthropology!)
- No conceptualisation of the Incarnation as such (it's a paradox!)

2. Karl Barth (1886-1968)



Barth Reading

- K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1919, 2nd ed. 1921, ET: 1933.
- T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth. An Introduction to his Early Theology*, London 1962.
- B. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology. Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936*, Oxford 1995.
- R.E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis. The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, Tübingen 2001.

Barth – early theology

- Influence of Kierkegaard, Kant, Religious Socialism (and indeed political socialism).
- From 1911 pastor at Safenwil (Switzerland)
- Break with the liberalism of his academic teachers and their forebears (esp. Schleiermacher)
- Major criticism of theology since 18th century: put humanity at the centre of theology, rather than God.

Barth III

- Major document of his early period is his commentary on Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*
- Barth all but ignores historical scholarship.
- Reads St Paul under the assumption that he was speaking of God – the problems with that would be the same then and now.
- Central tenet (with Kierkegaard): dichotomy of God and man.
- Christ signifies the intersection of two planes, a known and an unknown.

Barth IV

- ‘The point on the line of intersection is no more extended onto the known plane than is the unknown plane of which it proclaims the existence. The effulgence, or, rather, the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell, the void by which the point on the line of intersection makes itself known in the concrete world of history, is not – even though it be named the life of Jesus – that other world which touches our world in Him.’ (29)

Barth V

- Combination of two elements from Kierkegaard: infinite difference between God and humanity & Incarnation as a paradox.
- Consequently, Christological focus on the resurrection:
- The Resurrection is the revelation: the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus. The Resurrection is the emergence of the necessity of giving glory to God: the reckoning with what is unknown and unobservable in Jesus, the recognition of him as Paradox ... In the resurrection the new world of the Holy Spirit touches the old world ... (30)

Barth VI

- At the resurrection Jesus is 'proclaimed' Son of God (cf. Rom 1, 4) – this is all that matters:
- '[This] is the significance of Jesus, and, apart from this, Jesus has no more significance or insignificance than may be attached to any man or thing or period of history in itself.' (30)
- The crucial event is not the 'merging or fusion' of God and man, but the unveiling of the coming Kingdom of God.

Barth VII

- Relevance of eschatology (cf. Schweitzer!)
- Barth: this meant an expectation of something entirely different from history, not some dramatic end of history.
- Rejects assumption of early Christian 'crisis' because the Parousia, the 2nd coming of Christ, did not occur.
- Eschatology is as much a matter of hope now as it was then:

Barth VIII

- ‘But that day and that hour no man knoweth – *not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father* (Mk 13, 32). Do not our ears burn when we hear this? Will there never be an end of all our ceaseless talk about the *delay* of the Parousia? ... The end of which the New Testament speaks is no temporal event, no legendary ‘destruction’ of the world; it has nothing to do with any historical, or ‘telluric’ or cosmic catastrophe. The end of which the New Testament speaks is really the End; so utterly the End, that in the measuring of nearness or distance our nineteen hundred years are not merely of little, but of no importance’. (500)

Barth IX

- Barth manages to break away from major Christological patterns of the 19th century.
- The liabilities of the early 20th century discovery of eschatology are virtually turned into an asset.
- Theocentric, not Christocentric theology.
- Notion of the Incarnation practically vanishes: Jesus is an occasion for the resurrection to occur.

More Barth Reading

- K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, London 1967
- MacCormack, *Barth's critically realistic dialectical Theology*, Oxford 1996, part iv
- J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective. Christological Perspectives in the theology of Karl Barth*, Edinburgh 1978.
- G. Hunsinger in: Webster (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*
- T. Hart, 'Was God in Christ' in: id. *Regarding Karl Barth*, Carlisle 1999
- R. Jenson, *God after God*, Indianapolis 1969.

Barth's Later Theology

- Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is strictly christocentric.
- Therefore Christology cannot be limited to one particular topic.
- How does it shape the work as a whole?
- Christocentric focus has led Barth to negative and positive assertions. The negative ones are better known, the positive ones probably more important.

Later Barth II

- Major decision is rejection of 'natural theology'.
- Any attempt to speak theologically apart from Christ (analogy of being; 'anthropological' theology of liberalism)
- Barth sees danger of universal approach → Christianity is reduced to one instance of a more general truth.
- Instead, theology ought to be concrete.

Later Barth III

- Revelation does not mean a set of propositions, but becoming aware of reality.
- Jesus is the revelation of the Word of God because in him our eyes are opened to the reality of God and the human being.
- Barth thus is less 'orthodox' than has been claimed.
- Can be seen as forerunner of 'postmodernist' emphasis on specificity (J. Derrida; cf. G. Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*).

Later Barth IV

- Focus on Jesus Christ means that theology is based on the notion of reconciliation.
- God revealed himself as being aligned to humanity.
- God revealed the human being as exalted to the divine image.
- These are orthodox categories, but modified within a christocentric system:
- Doctrines of God, creation and Fall cannot be articulated independently of the Christ event.

Later Barth V

- The consequence is that everything stands under the proposition that the world has been reconciled to God; sin truly is 'nothingness'.
- All the initial negations of the CD are modified in light of this insight:
- In light of faith the world is full of signs pointing to God.
- In light of the Christ event the history of religions takes on a positive significance.

Later Barth VI

- Has Barth turned wholly idealistic and left his dialectical phase behind?
- No, because God's revelation is at the same time his concealment.
- We do not grasp his being, but see his salvific will.
- Incarnation and reconciliation are not necessary consequences of God's nature (as in Hegel), but God's free decision to align himself with humans.
- Therefore, theology does not turn into a metaphysics of a loving God.