

Week 3: Negative Theology and its Problems

- K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1919, 21922 (ET: 1968)
- J.-L. Marion, *God without Being*, 1982
- J. Macquarrie, *In Search of Deity*.
- *Essay in Dialectical Theism*, 1984
- J.P. Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 2000

Karl Barth (1886-1968)



1. Karl Barth's doctrine of God in his dialectical phase

- 'If I have a system it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven and you art on earth.' (*Epistle to the Romans*, 10)

Barth II

- Barth's major concern is thinking about God.
- Rejection of theology based on human religiosity.
- First phase: dialectical theology - emphasising the absolute difference between human and divine.

Barth III

- Being what we are, human beings in the world, we cannot hope to have escaped the 'religious possibility'. [...] We may storm from one room into another, but not out of the house into the open. We may understand, however, that even this final, inescapable possibility [i.e. religion] is, even in its most daring, most acute, strongest, 'most impossible' variants a *human* possibility ... (*Epistle to the Romans*)

Barth IV

- *Three Kantian ideas:*
- We cannot transcend our cognitive limit.
- We have to confine ourselves to the realm of experience.
- Yet we can at least be aware of this situation - there is room for an epistemological critique.

Barth IV

- This Kantian epistemology is also the basis of Barth's theological critique of 'religion'.
- Kant's critique leads Barth to a strong emphasis on revelation.
- Contrast revelation - natural theology is key.

From *Church Dogmatics* I/2

- *One cannot say of the obviously existent religious capacity of man that it is, as it were, the general form of human cognition, which then receives its proper and true contents in revelation and in faith. On the contrary, we are dealing with a contradiction: within religion the human being rebels against, and cuts himself off from, revelation by obtaining for himself a substitute for it, by taking for himself what should be given to him by God through revelation.*

Barth VI

- Is this approach negative theology?
- In 'The Word of God and the task of the ministry' Barth rejects 'mysticism' alongside 'dogmatism'.
- For him only acceptance of the revelation in Christ avoids 'natural theology'.
- Nietzsche's 'nihilism' is accepted for a world without revelation.

Barth VII

- Yet the full force of the 'nihilism' of a god-less world can only be borne if one knows that this isn't the final word.
- Thus revelation is in one sense inevitable.
- Through its dichotomy of bottom-up vs. top-down approach Barth's theology is post-Kantian.

2. Jean-Luc Marion's post-modern version of negative theology

- J.-L. Marion, *The Idol and Distance. Five Studies*, 1977; ET: 2001 (trans. Th. A. Carlson)
- J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being*, 1982; ET: 1991 (2nd ed. 2012).
- This contains a useful 'Translator's Introduction'
- R. Horner, *JLM. A Theo-logical Introduction*, 2005
- Id., *Rethinking God as Gift. Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*, 2002

Jean-Luc Marion (1946-)



Marion II

- Marion is phenomenologist philosopher
- Influenced by Nietzsche, E. Husserl, E. Levinas, J. Derrida
- His theology draws on Barth and H.U. von Balthasar
- Crucial in GWB is distinction between *idol* and *icon*.

Marion III

- The idol attracts human gaze and therefore fails to *point to* something else.
- Looking at them we only perceive them and ourselves.
- Yet they are mistaken for reality – hence the Jewish-Christian polemic against ‘idols’.
- Sinful human beings produce idols to support their will to power.

Marion IV

- Idols would thus include concepts and philosophical and theological ideas.
- Response to Feuerbach's challenge: God as projection!
- Marion: this is true, but only for the *idol*.
- Christianity must join them in exposing those.

Marion V

- Christianity also possesses an alternative: the *icon*.
- This is less 'beautiful' than the idol and therefore directs attention away from itself to what it signifies.
- This is the fundamental idea of 'apophaticism'
- Marion seeks to appropriate this tradition.

Marion VI

- Still, Marion is closer to Barth than to pre-modern apophatic theologians.
- His world is devoid of transcendence, and he too sees revelation as a means for facing its nihilism.

3. The fundamental problem

- The early Barth and Marion offer negative theology as a response to modern challenges to theology.
- How helpful is this line of defence?
- Provides an argument against the charge of anthropocentrism.
- Detaches God from world of human experience and excludes the possibility of affirmative statements about him.