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Karl Barth and Christian Theology of Religions: An Asian Response to Ensminger

PAUL S. CHUNG

Abstract

Sven Ensminger has presented a pioneering work in thoroughly investigating Karl Barth's theology as a resource for Christian theology of religions. In response to Ensminger's book, this paper deals with Barth's insight into interreligious learning, and aims at supplementing Ensminger's study in a critical and constructive manner.

Key words: *extra Calvinisticum*, *aufhebung*, *extra muros ecclesiae*, *lichtenlehre*, *theatrum gloriae dei*, *analogia relationis*, *larva dei*, *parrhesia*

ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENT IN ENSMINGER'S STUDY OF KARL BARTH AND RELIGION

This paper critically and constructively examines Karl Barth's contributions to Christian theology of religions or comparative theology. The work of Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a*

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Christian Theology of Religions[1] is a recent study which attempts to clarify Barth's reflections on revelation and religion in conversation with a project on a Christian theology of religions. It explores the extent to which Barth's theology serves as a resource. Is Barth serviceable here? To begin with, the author takes up a classification of Barth's theology as "being exclusivist, inclusivist, and universalist all at once."[2] He, moreover, applies this complicated stance to a Christian theology of religions. Because of the major purpose of this paper, I focus on chapter 1 and 2 of the book.

In the analysis of Barth's understanding of revelation and religion,[3] Ensminger expounds Barth's language of *aufhebung* in a threefold sense: (1) held up on high (singling out religion), (2) held in place (restraining or suspending religion), and (3) held in store (upholding and preserving the religion). Through this polysemy of *aufhebung* (similar to Hegelian dialectics), the proclaimed word and the Scripture continually become God's Word in light of the priority of revelation.

Barth provocatively discusses the significance of revelation as it relates to religious traditions:

> [T]he Veda to the Indians, the Avesta to the Persians, the Tripitaka to the Buddhists, the Koran to its believers: are they not all "bibles" in exactly the same way as the Old and New Testaments?[4]

If Barth credits the revelation of God as the *aufhebung* of religion in a dynamic, threefold sense as suggested above, then it is God's revelation that makes Christian religion into the human face of revelation.

Although Barth rejects *extra Calvinisticum* as too speculative in his later stage, Barth does not intend to ignore the majesty and sovereign lordship of God for the church and the world, calling the Christian church to be one of the lights reflecting the Light of Christ.[5] In Barth's statement we read, "In His revelation God is present in the world of human religion." It is not plausible to hold any triumphalistic attitude

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[1] Sven Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology as a Resource for a Christian Theology of Religions* (Bloomsbury: T & T Clark, 2014).

[2] Ibid., 1.

[3] Ibid., 45.

[4] CD I/2: 282. CD for the abbreviation of *Church Dogmatics* by Karl Barth, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004).

[5] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 59n57.

of Christianity over non-Christian religions. Religion as unbelief is, first of all, applied to Christians and then non-Christians.[6]

According to Barth, "The religion of revelation is indeed bound up with the revelation of God: but the revelation of God is not bound up with the religion of revelation."[7] Here the author casually mentions that Barth refers to the religion of Israel in an exemplary fashion. In fact, Barth's theology of Israel presents a paradigmatic example to Jewish-Christian dialogue vectoring through different stages: election between church and Israel, including his later revision to overcome previous limitations in favor of his positive teaching of God's faithfulness to Israel, and also in his appraisal of the Vatican II document (*Nostra Aetate*).[8]

Barth's position "has nothing to do with arrogance towards other religions, but is a call to faithful self-examination."[9] More than that, Barth encourages the church to adopt a humble and open attitude by listening attentively to the strange and profane voice of God,[10] which remains an undercurrent in his later teaching of *extra muros ecclesiae*.[11]

This perspective circumscribes Hick's assessment of Barth as sublime bigotry without having real interest in or awareness of the wider religious life of humankind.[12] To the contrary, I prefer to characterize Barth's position in terms of "particularity" in faithfulness to God's revelation and reconciliation in Christ rather than the exclusion of others. Barth's exclusivity coupled with the Reformers' teaching of justification *extra nos* characterizes a self-critique of Christian exclusivism, a call to spiritual poverty before God's mystery, and a humble attitude toward God's alien voice in the reconciled world. Knitter should not be suspicious of Barth's egotism or so-called "better than thou attitude" in regard to non-Christian religions, but he remains limited in clarifying "exclusive contradiction"[13] without examining Barth's teaching of lights. Further, Ensminger takes the universality of revelation in Christ

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[6] Ibid., 68.

[7] Ibid., 70.

[8] Andreas Pangritz and Paul S. Chung, eds., *Theological Audacities. Selected Essays: Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010).

[9] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 74; CD I/2: 327.

[10] CD I/1: 55.

[11] CD IV/3.1: 110.

[12] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 60.

[13] Ibid., 64.

as the foundation for the teaching of lights,[14] without adequately dealing with the charge of revelation positivism.

Barth's maxim "beginning anew and once again at the beginning"[15] comes as a theology of crisis to Christian religion as well as non-Christian religions. It also encourages an open attitude toward the other. This openness toward pluralist claims of the other is stated in his reflection of God's strange voice, embedded within his early activity of religious socialism:

> God may speak to us through Russian Communism [Leninism], a flute concerto [Mozart], a blossoming shrub [Moses' Torah], or a dead dog [perhaps a jargon in the left-wing Hegelian circle against Hegel's philosophy after his death].[16]

God's act of speech occurs in all media and has an analogical-political character both in Barth's reflection of early Safenwil theology and in his parabolic reflection of God's kingdom, social justice, and democracy in "The Christian Community and the Civil Community" (1946).[17]

This openness distinguishes the prophetic meaning of the gospel as vectored in revelation and reconciliation in a universal fashion. Thus I prefer the term "openness" in a critical and emancipatory framework rather than classifying Barth as a "universalist" per se. With this open attitude to the possibility of *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation,[18] Barth also does not sidestep the reality of the unreconciled world characterized by nothingness in connection with lordless powers.[19]

Barth can be interpreted as making a provocative counterproposal to the old form of natural theology (based on *logos spermatikos*) or Rahner's anonymous Christians by way of a universal framework of prophecy and revelation of Jesus Christ. Ensminger sides with Jüngel in stating that Barth's *lichtenlehre* is a new teaching with positive extension of his old critique, but not a retraction of it.[20] Thus, "Barth's

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[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] CD I/2 §64.2; CD IV/3.1: 144.

[16] CD I/1: 55.

[17] "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," in Clifford Green, ed., *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 265–295.

[18] CD IV/3.1: 478.

[19] *The Christian Life*, CD IV/4; *Lecture Fragments*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), §78.2, "The Lordless Powers."

[20] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 24.

theology in its entirety can be used for a Christian theology of religions."[21]

In his interview about the *lichtenlehre*, Barth affirmed the presence of *mitbrüder* (co-brothers and sisters) inheriting their possibility from the kingdom of God outside of Christianity. He reminds readers that he came from the circle of religious socialism and stands in profound solidarity with those committed to social justice and democracy.[22] Certainly, Barth repudiates National Socialism as a false gospel in his reflection of *Wort zur sache* (theological reflection of the Word of God), which has concrete political implication of the Word in the social context. This prophetic critique of National Socialism lies in Barth's understanding of it as an unreconciled reality extant in the political abuse of the gospel by the pro-Nazi German Christians. Barth's reflection of the relationship between *analogans* (God's kingdom) and *analogatum* (secular forms of parables) becomes obvious in his letter to Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer: Ethics—co-humanity—servant church-discipleship—democratic socialism—peace movement—political responsibility.[23] Thus, Barth's language of analogy is not merely reduced to a scholastic teaching of analogy; it is rather socially engaged.

LICHTENLEHRE AND CRITICAL, SOCIAL ANALOGY

In the reconciled world God may speak to the church in the otherness of the other, speaking even from the mouth of Balaam where listeners recognize the well-known voice of the Good Shepherd despite its sinister origin.[24] Because he accepts secular parables and lights as free communications of God, Barth presents a particular-inclusivist stance devoid of ecclesial triumphalism and radically open to truth claims in a pluralist context. As a discerning guide of lights in correspondence

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[21] Ibid., 223.

[22] Karl Barth, *Gespräche IV: 1964–1968*, ed. Eberhard Busch (Zurich: TVZ, 1997), 401.

[23] Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000); Paul S. Chung, *Karl Barth: God's Word in Action* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 13.

[24] CD IV/3.1: 119.

with the Kingdom of God—supplementary and auxiliary criterion[25]—the church is tasked with closely examining whether profane words and lights are in agreement with the Scripture or church tradition or doctrine. It also asks whether the fruits of these words outside Christianity are good and if their effect in the community is positive. This perspective presents the need to learn of other religions by delimiting a one-sided argument: "a theology of religions without critique of religion is for Christian theology impossible."[26]

Without an appeal to the sorry hypothesis of a natural theology,[27] Barth positively embraces dangerous modern expressions like "the revelation of creation" or "primal revelation."[28] The divine work of reconciliation does not negate the divine work of creation, nor does it deprive it of meaning.[29] The world, the cosmos, and nature retain their own lights and truths and therefore their own speech and words.[30] There is the luminosity of the creaturely world in the *theatrum gloriae Dei* functioning as the sphere of revelation and reconciliation.[31] God in God's self-attestation challenges and critically relativizes the luminosity and the lights of the *theatrum*, but God also institutes and integrates them positively into the light of God's self-attestation in Jesus Christ.

This integration of creation with reconciliation offers an alternative to the Reformers' notion of the first function of the law by way of transformation, so that Barth surprisingly argues in his posthumous writing of *The Christian Life*:

> God's name, then, is already holy in the world that he created good long before Christianity begins to pray for its hallowing or to be zealous for the honor of God. Is not his name holy in every blade of grass and every snowflake?[32]

Reminiscent of Luther's metaphor of creation as *larvae Dei* (masks of God) in connection with Calvin's *theatrum gloriae Dei*, God is objectively known from the side of creation through Christ's reconciliation.

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[25] CD IV/3.1: 127–128.
[26] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 224.
[27] CD IV/3.1: 117.
[28] CD IV/3.1: 40.
[29] CD IV/3.1: 139.
[30] Ibid.
[31] CD IV/3.1: 151.
[32] *The Christian Life*, CD IV/4: 121.

In his reflection on the hiddenness of God,[33] Barth's theological hermeneutics affirms the knowability of God by God alone, as visible only to faith attested by faith in the grace of God's revelation. But in the context of the integration of creation with reconciliation, Barth argues provocatively that we are at fault if a subjective knowledge of God on the human side does not correspond to God's objective knowledge.[34]

Considering the documents of Vatican II, Barth found it no longer necessary to discuss this life long debate because "we are in unity about what can be meant by it."[35] However, in his early debate with the Catholic teaching of *analogia entis*, Barth was already convinced of Söhngen's position: There has to be an assumption of the *analogia entis* by the *analogia fidei*, because "Analogia fidei is sanans et elevans analogiam entis" (analogy of faith is healing and elevating analogy of being) through Jesus Christ.[36]

Driven by this emphasis, Barth's *analogia relationis* grounded in the inner-trinitarian co-existence, co-inherence, and reciprocity[37] can be properly spoken of in Christological terms. Barth's *analogia relationis* is a correspondence of relations based on God's "yes" to creation or God's love in freedom for the world. God's being is critically an all-transforming reality, and God the complete Transformer (*Der ganz Ändernde*) conscripts the lights of the world God's revolution, witnessing to Jesus Christ as "the partisan of the poor."[38] This is a counterproposal to the negative limitations of *theologia naturalis vulgaris* or a disguised acceptance of *logos spermatikos* that is vulnerable to the threatening danger of nothingness imbued with the reality of National Socialism and lordless powers in our midst. The act-structure of *analogia relationis* critically transcends an ontological form of language; it relativizes, integrates, and transforms the traditional and metaphysical structure of *analogia entis* and Brunner's eristic method of "how" materially and socially for radicalizing the theological "what" in light of God's reconciliation in Christ.

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[33] CD II/1 §27.1.

[34] *The Christian Life*, CD IV/4: 121.

[35] Barth, *Gespräche, 1964–1968*, 337.

[36] CD II/1: 82. Certainly, Barth's view of general revelation, or even natural theology, is a much-discussed subject in recent Barth studies. It is beyond our scope to include the discussion of this issue in comparison with contemporary Barth scholars (for instance, Bruce McCormack, Paul Nimmo, George Hunsinger and Paul D. Jones).

[37] CD III/2: 221.

[38] CD IV/3.2: 586.

If Barth asks the church to be grateful in receiving the lights from without, in very different human words, and, in secular parables, the church must be prepared to see and hear God's sovereignty in the other spheres, even in secular occurrences. Here it is important to welcome the lights as signs and attestations of the lordship of the one prophecy of Jesus Christ.

Ensminger is certain that Barth encourages the church to hold openness to other lights. If so, is this openness to pluralist claims of other lights to be seen only under the augury of the recognition of faith?[39] Who in the recognition of faith is in the position to recognize the Amida Buddhism as one of the lights, without deeply learning its truth claim? It is unfortunate to see that the author does not scrutinize Barth's comparative study of Amida Buddhism and his evaluation of Buddha nature in terms of Buddhist scholarship.

Certainly, in contrast to Zwingli (naming Hercules, Theseus, Socrates, Cicero for salvation),[40] Barth hesitates to assign dogmatic status to such extraordinary ways and free communications of Jesus Christ because of the radical character of investigation of true words. But Barth does not want to limit individual's freedom of investigating these words.[41]

BARTH AND BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

Given revelation as *aufhebung* of religion, Ensminger discerns that Barth acknowledges the concept of justification by faith in the context of Amida Buddhism. To be more exact, Barth is referring to Jodoshinsu Buddhism, a unique sect of Japanese Buddhism within the context of Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhist-Christian dialogue in a Barthian fashion has been developed by Kazumi Takizawa and Gempo Hoshino in Japanese context.[42] However, my question to these Japanese Barthian scholars is whether they take into account Barth's undogmatic and

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[39] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 33.
[40] CD IV/3.1: 135
[41] CD IV/3.1: 133.
[42] Ensminger, *Karl Barth's Theology*, 70.

irregular reflection of *lichtenlehre* in terms of its critical emancipatory dimension to the reality of lordless powers imbuing the religious world.

If we find the analogy or parabolic character of justified sinner in Jodoshinsu Buddhism, it is important to clarify the language of analogy or parable in light of the correspondence between Christian grace *extra nos* and a Buddhist notion of grace from the power of Amida. If in following Barth, we seek to construct a theory of correspondence between the revelation of God and non-Christian religions in a Barthian sense, it would be difficult without learning deeply of other lights in any religions through the "analectical" (analogical-dialectical) procedure: appreciation, critical distance, and recovery of new meaning for a Christian theology of religions.

Barth seems to understand correctly the major difference between Honen and Shinran. Honen (1133–1212), a teacher of Shinran (1173–1263), once stated: "Even sinners will enter life, how much more the righteous." If a sinner enters the world of redemption through the grace of Amida, it goes without saying that the righteous enters redemption through their good deeds. However, Shinran radically reversed Honen's statement: "If the righteous enter life, how much more in the case of sinners."[43] Barth follows the radicalism of justification in the grace of Amida according to Shinran, bringing it into relevance with the Reformation theology of grace and justification. The righteous and the sinners in Shinran's version must enter the world of redemption on the same basis of Amida's primal vow and grace for those who invoke the name of Amida.

Barth's critical attitude toward Jodoshinshu Buddhism, however, lies in the absence of the name Jesus Christ. At this stage, Barth's reading of Buddhism seeks a symptom of grace in Amida Buddhism, without further clarification of the universal meaning of the name Jesus Christ. In the context of *lichtenlehre* we read: "We may think of the radicalness of the need of redemption or the fullness of what is meant by redemption, if it is to meet this need."[44] If Shinran expresses the desire for the radicalness of redemption, can it not be conceived of as one of lights and truths coming from God's mystery?

In a later interview regarding the hidden Christ in the Indian context, Barth responded:

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[43] CD I/2: 341.

[44] CD IV/3.1: 125.

> The wind blows where it wills (John 3:8): Break-through (revelation) of the hidden Christ is always and everywhere possible: Inside and outside the church; even in the life and work and message of strangers (Melchizedek! [Gen 14:18; Heb 7:1–4]), heathen, atheists![45]

Does Barth imply hidden Christ in other religions?

BARTH AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

At the Leuenberg conference of 1992, Markus Barth reported on his father's plan, entitled "The General History of Religion," for engagement with the history of religion. In consideration of Barth's plan, Klappert introduces Barth's research plan: 1. the relation between Christianity and Judaism; 2. the relation between Judaism and Islam; 3. the relation between Buddhism and Hinduism. This ordering of relationships reveals Barth's interest in world religions concerning *Nostra Aetate* in the Vatican II council.[46] Christian theology of religions following Barth is impossible without the critique of religion, or without undertaking a deep learning of the religion.

One example is evident in Barth's openness to the Islamic community in his dialogue with J. Bouman from Lebanon. Barth reported: "In theological appreciation of the situation there [in Lebanon]…we were but completely in agreement that 'a new communication about the relation between the Bible and the Koran is an urgent task for us.'"[47] A new communication about the relation between the Bible and the Koran recalls Barth's desire for the church to adopt the confession of guilt regarding "the deplorable role of the Church in the so-called crusades."[48]

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[45] Barth, *Gespräche: 1964–1968*, 565.

[46] Bertold Klappert, *Versöhnung und Befreiung: Versuche, Karl Barth kontextuell zu verstehen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1994), 50.

[47] Karl Barth, *Briefe 1961–1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and H. Stoevesandt (Zurich: TVZ, 1975), 504.

[48] Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum*, trans. Keith R. Crim (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1969), 37.

Already in his evaluation of Islam's achievements, Barth maintains that these should be valued and taken seriously without crass arrogance of the white Christians. Its achievements and constructs can be viewed in both primitive forms and higher forms; psychological, sociological, aesthetic, and ethical from general human standpoint.[49] Barth's concept of evangelization and prophetic diakonia contradicts Western models of conversion (Kraemer), because the conversion is "the work of God alone," not the work of church.[50]

Furthermore, Barth in discussing the basic form of humanity finds similarities in references of Martin Buber, Feuerbach, and Confucius. His theological anthropology appreciates different angles and descriptions of humanity, although these descriptions are different from theological anthropology. In Barth's account, "there are approximations and similarities; in this very fact we may even see a certain confirmation." "Even with his natural knowledge of himself the natural man is still in the sphere of divine grace." This perspective qualifies Barth's theological anthropology for undergirding a comparative theology in learning and embracing worldly—that is, non-Christian—wisdom.[51]

If the problem of theology can be seen as wholly set within the framework of the problem of culture, Barth's theology of word-deed first addresses its contingent contemporaneity in a particular social historical context,[52] as influenced by the historically conditioned documentations and social connections.[53] Theology is self-critical and delimited by its own approximation toward the mystery of God, being always incomplete and open-ended. It is in need of correction and renewal at every point.[54] The hermeneutical integration of the word-deed and the theologian's particular context guides our understanding of the Word of God in a critical and emancipatory frame of reference, while interpreting the words of other religions as free communications of God. This learning process leads to a recovery project of new meaning for the church to speak with *parrhesia* boldly to its past wrongdoing; to call for metanoia regarding Judaism (Shoah) and Islam (crusade). It may also encourage other faith communities to speak out against the reality of lordless powers in the underside of their religious history.

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[49] CD IV/3:2: 875.
[50] CD IV/3.2: 876.
[51] CD III/2: 277.
[52] CD I/1:145, 283–284.
[53] CD IV/3.2: 821.
[54] CD II/1: 202.

Barth remains an inspiration for our discussion of Christian theology of religions or comparative theology. This task belongs to the future course of Barth scholarship which breaks through the iron cage of the positivism of revelation. More than that, it is also a significant project of better understanding Barth in different contexts via critical and constructive learning—first from Barth's theology of Israel, and then in the non-Christian religions in light of "faith seeking understanding" within the context of *lichtenlehre*. Barth did not want his students to become Barthians, nor to identify him as Neo-orthodox theologian. I have come to appreciate the fact that Barth is always ahead of them and us!