

Chapter 1

Introduction: Barth as Conversationalist

Mike A. Higton and John C. McDowell

There were two main reasons for conceiving this project. In the first place, we felt that something more ought to be done to shake off the nagging suspicions, commonly voiced, that Barth does not make a good conversation partner. James Barr's comment is representative of one kind of objection: Barth, he says, 'paid little attention to other people's opinions' (Barr, 1993, p. 31). Stating the problem in this way, of course, leaves Barr vulnerable to a lazy riposte – one that would simply rack up a list of Barth's approving citations or lengthy discussions of the ideas of other thinkers. His theological appreciation of Mozart's praise of creation, or of Heidegger and Sartre's limited but nevertheless instructive discussions of *nothingness* are well known, for instance. Such proof-texting is always frivolous, however, and leaves the core of Barr's suspicion fatally undamaged. Something more far-ranging is being claimed by Barr here: that Barth's theology illegitimately secures itself from critique; that it polices its narrow location assiduously and only lets in a few carefully vetted others when convinced that they can be of service.¹

In the second place, we began this project not only because of our sense that this kind of suspicion depended upon an ill-judged account of what Barth was up to theologically, but for the far more positive reason that we are convinced that Barth continues in practice to remain a fascinating and important figure for the doing of theology today. We wanted to show not only that Barth was best understood as a conversational theologian, but to encourage others to engage in wide-ranging, many-

voiced conversations with him. Something of this conviction is already apparent in a claim of Paul M. van Buren's in 1964:

If we would learn something of what it is like to be a man of the twentieth century in intimate conversation with the long past of theology (and thereby perhaps learn something more of that past than is easily discernible from these New World shores) it will be worth our while never to dismiss this man as a relic of an antique world or as a conservative or reactionary who will not move with the times (van Buren, 1964, p. xiv).

The recent increased rate of growth in secondary literature on Barth's theology is itself an indication of the value of this comment. Whilst there may have been times since his death when Barth's influence seemed to be a spent force, the vast bulk of reflections on his theology published during the past half decade or so should make us dubious about any such claim. The forms of reception of that influence differ widely, of course, from those who dine and converse with a welcome guest to those who attempt to flee from an intruder but, whether to critical friend or to bemused enemy, Barth seems to present an inexhaustible field for redescription and engagement. However much we are willing to attribute to the self-absorbed dynamism of the academic Barth-studies industry, there must be something about his work which allows that industry to thrive – and, in any case, genuinely interesting readings and debates continue to be developed, particularly amongst those who, whilst enthusiastic about his theology, respect Barth's fear of being uncritically repeated (see Barth, 1963, 12). More than twenty years on, we may echo John Webster's conclusion to a survey of Barth literature from 1975 to 1981: '... the understanding and critical reception of Barth's work is a task which is still not at

all finished. There could hardly be a better testimony to a theologian's continuing fruitfulness' (Webster, 1982, p. 35).

Karl Barth, conversationalist

A volume entitled *Conversing With Barth* is a viable project, we believe, because Barth saw himself standing within the spaces opened up for him by his past, and found the shape of his thought subtly refigured through the various conversations he had with his contemporaries. Karl Barth was a conversational theologian. Yet we need to be careful to interpret that comment in an appropriate sense, for Barth has sometimes been misread by those who presuppose a different conception of what it means to be a conversationalist.² Barth says,

You speak of conversation, but what does this mean? Conversation takes place when one party has something *new* and *interesting* to say to the other. Only then is conversation an event. One must say something engaging and original, something with an element of mystery. The Church must sound strange to the world if it is not to be dull We may read philosophers (and we should!) without accepting their presuppositions. We may listen respectfully (I have a holy respect for a *good* philosopher!). We can learn much from philosophy and science. But as theologians we must be obedient to the Word (Barth, 1963, p. 19).

Several things are noteworthy about this set of comments. In the first place, Barth's interest in presuppositions betrays an interest in the particularity and difference that makes conversation possible. We do not converse because we share a common foundation, and can trade variations upon that agreed theme, but because we are different. Barth's reiteration of his commitment to determinatively ecclesial

presuppositions is not a refusal of conversation, any more than is his recognition of the different presuppositions of the philosophers.³ Conversation involves difference, and the awareness of difference – neither the suppression nor the ‘celebration’ of difference, but a willingness to take it seriously. Put differently, Barth is aware of the fact that any conversation is always between a *particular* someone and a *particular* someone else; there can be no a-temporal or a-contextual conversation in which the conversation partners leave who they are behind in order to dialogue in so-called ‘objectivity’.

We could compare this unembarrassed reliance upon presuppositions which are not shared, but which need not isolate, with Harnack’s 1923 complaint that Barth was ‘unscientific’ in his work – a complaint which seems to conflate reading guided by unshared presuppositions with a relativistic free-for-all. For Harnack, if there is no obviously objective reading of a text then its meaning fragments into the chaos of readers’ private preferences.⁴ For him, only a hermeneutical objectivity grounded in universally shared assumptions can free readings from potential nihilism and for public discussion, interaction, and assessment.

Barth’s response exposes the unshared presuppositions in Harnack’s own position. ‘I think I owe it to you and our listeners’, he says,

to confess that I do consider my answers open to debate, but that still for the time being and until I am shown a better way I reserve all else to myself. Nonetheless, your objections cannot deter me from continuing to ask along the line of those answers. (Barth, 1972b, 40)

Barth here subverts Harnack’s own accusations by accusing him of not listening and of methodological parochialism – the ‘science’ of theology may be broader than Harnack had imagined, but Harnack is unprepared to entertain any voices different from his own.

Harnack's theology, then, is the one that is closed (Barth, 1972b, 42). Even so, Barth continues,

I would like to be able to listen attentively in the future to whatever *you* also have to say. But at this time I cannot concede that you have driven me off the field with your questions and answers, although I will gladly endure it when it really happens. (Barth, 1972b, 52)

Barth is unapologetic in naming the particular shape of his own presuppositions, those which set him on the particular line he was asking on – they are theological ones. As the 'But' in his claim cited earlier suggested ('*But* as theologians we must be obedient to the Word'), it is clear that he is not prepared to renege on his commitments. That would be to deny who he is.

Returning to that quotation, we can in the second place note Barth's insistence that 'The Church must sound strange to the world if it is not to be dull'. Far from believing that his presuppositions rule him out from conversation, by enclosing him in an impervious enclave, Barth rather believes that he is enabled to converse precisely by those presuppositions. This is not, despite what we have just been saying, because he has some theory which would argue that, *in general*, particularity and conversation go together, but rather because the specific shape which his Christian identity takes is one which is constitutionally open to conversation – in a way that may or may not find partial parallels in the differing identities of others. So, for instance, it is precisely *because* he is a Christian that Barth is committed to a particular way of seeing the world in Jesus Christ that recognises and generously admits its indebtedness to those who have spoken within the Christian church past and present. This is not only clear in the lectures available as *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, but as early as the

Preface to the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*. There, Barth was able to claim that ‘[t]he understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow. And it is a conversation always conducted honestly and with discernment’ (Barth, 1933, 1). This is not, for Barth, some general commitment to the role and possibilities of tradition, but a *theological* conviction. Theologically, it rests upon to a recognition that our activity as Christian theologians exists only in constant dependence, and to the recognition that this dependence is itself the fruit of an original, establishing and generative *absolute dependence*.⁵ Prayer, then, is the origin of conversation, and a theology of grace demands attention to the notion that we converse because we have been conversed with – in Jesus Christ. We listen to the other because we listen to God – Christ is the divine Word and human hearing. The church is to live in the faith that it is not engaged in dialogue only with itself.

Note the view of tradition, of handing-on, which is implied in this formulation, however. Barth is not satisfied with maintaining a commitment to some supposed identifiable set of theories or practices that could be carried through time in a pristine and immutable condition. He speaks of a conversation between yesterday and tomorrow, not of a sacred deposit delivered yesterday which we are charged to carry through to tomorrow. Barth could agree in general with Richard Roberts’ rejection of ‘The mechanical recapitulation of Christian doctrine merely as items in an inherited belief system, undertaken as though nothing had happened’ (Roberts, 1997, p. 716). It is frequently noted, for instance, that Barth, despite being a Reformed theologian, has learned to read the Reformers critically, as one concerned with how they might speak to theology in the twentieth century rather than with the assumption that they said all that they needed to say in the sixteenth. His re-envisioning of the doctrine of election in *CD*

II.2 is a good example of his avoidance of what Roberts calls a ‘theological necrophilia’ (Roberts, 1996, p. 192).⁶

In the third place, our quotation from Barth’s *Table Talk* indicates that Barth did not restrict the conversation to which his faith called him simply to the Christian tradition. William Stacy Johnson puts it well (although the term ‘event’ would seem better suited to Barth’s descriptions than ‘mystery’) when he claims that

[r]espect for the mystery of God would seem to demand nothing less than a multidimensional approach to the theological task In his survey of *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, for example, Barth professed a desire to attend to ‘all the voices of the past,’ and not merely the ones which have stood in official favor. This is necessary, he said, because one cannot anticipate in advance which voices will speak to the genuinely ‘theological’ elements in human endeavour (Johnson, 1997, p. 37 referring to Barth, 1972a, p. 17).

Both in theory and in practice, he displayed a willingness to engage with secular philosophy. All kinds of extra-ecclesial claims and facts can become witnesses to the Gospel, and can be perceived as such in the light of a Christological hermeneutic: Barth’s specifically Christian presuppositions provide him with an ear by which he can listen to voices from beyond the explicit pale of faith (Barth, 1990, p. 92; *CD I/1*, p.176).⁷ As Rowan Williams says, ‘the church judges the world; but it also hears God’s judgment on itself passed upon it by the world’ (Williams, 2000, p. 330).

Bruce Marshall argues that

on his [Barth’s] account the range of theological discourse seems unlimited; he seems concerned to deny rather than assert that there are ‘spheres’ of discourse ‘external’ to theology Since theological discourse has no abiding ‘outside’,

distinctions between discourse ‘internal’ and ‘external’ to theology, while in some respects perhaps provisionally useful, can in principle never be binding. Barth does not distinguish theology from other sorts of discourse primarily by locating a special subject-matter for it, still less by the principled exclusion or rejection of other kinds of discourse. What distinguishes theology is rather the particular way in which it strives to order all discourses: it interprets and assesses them by taking ‘Jesus Christ as he is attested for us in holy scripture’ as its primary and decisive criteria of truth and meaning Theology for Barth seems to be an open-ended project of understanding and judgement which, within the obvious limits of its human practitioners, aims at an estimate of all things – from Mozart to birth control, the rearmament of Germany to riding horses – oriented around this particular criterion (Marshall, 1993, p. 456).⁸

Barth makes positive but critical use of, for instance, extra-ecclesial anthropologies (*CD* III.2) and of Mozart’s music (*CD* III.3, 297ff.), and his use of philosophy is too complex to be reduced to any single systematic scheme (Barth, 1986); he uses philosophy eclectically but pervasively in the service of theology, while taking care not to allow it to undermine or overwhelm the particularity of theology’s witness to God in Christ. Thiemann describes this as ‘the temporary borrowing of a tool to help us better understand the complex meaning of the Christian Gospel.’ (Thiemann, 1991, 82) A statement of Barth’s renders the flavour of what he intends here. He admits that ‘[t]he central affirmations of the Bible are not self-evident Every possible means must be used ... not the least, the enlistment of every device of the conjectural imagination’ in order to interpret it.⁹ In this thematic context he famously declares

God may speak to us through Russian communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We do well to listen to Him if He really does

God may speak to us through a pagan or an atheist, and thus give us to understand that the boundary between the Church and the secular world can take at any time a different course from that which we think we discern (*CD* I.1, 55).¹⁰

Not only are these extra-ecclesial elements witnesses to God in Christ, they can function as critiques of the ways in which the churches performatively imagine the significance and import of that event. They are not significant because they shine a light complementary to that which shines in Christ, and the conversations we have with them are not intended to supplement the grace we find in Christ; rather these conversations are an essential part of Barth's theology precisely because they take him deeper into Christ, into the one commanding criterion of his work.

The virtue of arguing

One of the differences of approach which has sometimes obscured, for commentators, Barth's commitment to conversation, is their assumption that conversation is fundamentally *irenic* – that it is seen best where friendly agreement flourishes, coupled with a willingness to differ on secondary matters. For Barth, on the other hand, quite a bit of his conversation takes the form of strident argument. Is this a failure? Is Barth's commitment to conversation vitiated by the form in which he conducts it – by the violence of his disagreement, by the sheer unstoppable momentum of his writing? There may indeed be much truth in this, and there is no doubt that Barth could, from time to time, be as unfair as theologians anywhere in his hasty characterisations and even hastier dismissals of others. But we must beware of stating this too strongly, as if Barth's willingness to argue, and to argue hard, were itself a sign of failure.

Donald Allen and Rebecca Guy speak for many when they take conflict, including argument, as ‘generally mark[ing] the failure of social relations’, and therefore as a social pathology (Allen and Guy, 1974, p. 239). But such a rejection of argument can only function where religious beliefs and practices are reduced to bland differences in choice, to matters of private taste about which it would be tasteless to kick up a fuss. Such a rejection can only function where religious practices, and indeed the shape of all our politics and ethical practices, are removed from the dangerous ultimacy of worship (the recognition of a universal scope worthy of our worship) to the local subjectivities of consumer choice. In other words, the rejection of argument, of serious disagreement, is possible only for a pluralism where all is allowed because nothing is taken seriously (see Placher, 1989, 81).

Barth’s thought is resistant to this repressive tolerance, this easy, lazy pluralism which lets differences lie. The mark of a ‘failure of social relations’ can be found in Barth not where he argues, not where he engages in cheerful or bitter conflict (though we may sometimes regret his tone) but only where he ceases to believe that someone is worth arguing with, where he ceases to believe that someone is even worth contradicting. Where he argues, it is often the greatest compliment he can pay¹¹ – since to argue means both to maintain that the differences between his interlocutor and himself are real, and that these differences matter. The very heat of his arguments is often a sign that he believes the differences cut so deeply that to address them is a matter of urgent duty: it is a sign that he regards engaging with the interlocutor as a very serious matter indeed.

At his best, he shows a startling willingness to think through an alternative point of view seriously, and not to rest content with surface differences but to chase these

down into the deep theological divisions that underlie them. Barth's determination to let his disagreements with others be thoroughly theological is not – at least, not always – a sign that he simply wishes to line other thinkers up against the chalk-marks of his own standards, and dismiss all those that come in too short or too tall. Rather, he regards it as his duty to think through their claims from within his own frame of reference, not in the terms of some supposed neutrality,¹² because only in that way can he reach a genuine encounter with them, and only in that way can he genuinely be open to challenge by them. Only if he does the work to see how the interlocutor calls into question or contradicts the ways in which he has been faithful to his own deepest criteria can conversation be carried on. Only if he is willing to be so stridently critical can he be truly self-critical.¹³

As we have already suggested, this willingness – indeed, insistence – on pursuing disagreements to their roots, and thinking them through theologically, relies upon a refusal to divide the world up into incompatible spheres, incommensurable conversations, or radically discrete epochs. This is most clear if we restrict ourselves to Barth's dealings with the wide stream of the Christian tradition: his insistence upon criticising his opponents theologically is itself based on the assumption that every theologian is dealing with the same God, with the same Christ, and that whatever we attribute to differences of cultural context, philosophical resources, or rhetorical styles is secondary to a true grappling with that God, that Christ, that faith.¹⁴ Barth's willingness to do theological battle with his opponents is itself a mark of his belief that they too are hearers of the same Word. Something similar is at work in his dealings with others beyond the theological tradition. The only way open to Barth if he wishes to take these others seriously is to take them theologically, and his willingness to do so – even when

it is open to the temptation simply to turn them all into yet more grist for his own theological mill, simply confirming him in his own prejudices – is at its best not a mark of closure, but of profound openness.

This sense of the unavoidable urgency and seriousness of theological talk, of the unavoidable urgency and seriousness with which we must enter conversation from our particular theological position, and be willing to think other claims and ideas through theologically, accompanies and substantiates Barth's understanding of the fallibility and frailty of his own theology. However much his rhetoric sometimes lends itself to a sense of his theology's impervious strength, his work is never wholly without a sense of its own partial nature, and of its own necessary failure – and this sense is, in a hidden way, firmly present *in* (not just *despite*) his most trenchant theological grapplings with those with whom he disagrees. In our formation as listeners to the *Deus dixit* we have learned to hear distortedly; we must therefore constantly to return to our source, and become aware of our own pre-conscious, unconscious, and even conscious, temptation to idolatry – and that means both being open to challenge, and being challenging. This is why Barth is able to announce to Harnack that

I do not intend to entrench myself in those positions in which you, honoured Sir, and our voluntary–involuntary audience in this conversation have seen me, simply because I know how frightenly relative *everything* is that one can *say* about the great subject which occupies you and me. I know that it will be necessary to speak of it in a way quite different from that of my present understanding. (Barth, 1972b, 52)¹⁵

Something of the sense of the honesty of this generous and (self-)critical approach may be found in a comment made towards the end of Barth's life:

Being truly liberal means thinking and speaking in responsibility and openness on all sides, backwards and forwards, toward both past and future, and with what I might call total personal modesty. To be modest is not to be skeptical; it is to see what one thinks and says also has limits. This does not hinder me from saying very definitely what I think I see and know. But I can do this only in the awareness that there has been and are other people before and alongside me, and that still others will come after me. This awareness gives me an inner peace, so that I do not think I always have to be right even though I say definitely what I say and think. Knowing that a limit is set for me, too, I can move cheerfully within it as a free man (Barth, 1977, pp.34ff).

That Barth did not, in the end, engage with everyone and everything theologically is testimony to the limitations of time and resources, as well as to sometimes problematic decisions about whose work was worth the effort. That he certainly did not understand all those with whom he did engage equally well does not itself undermine his sense of openness to, and respect of, others, but is testimony to the partiality and fragility of his all-too-human hearing. However, while the details of these absent conversations, and those conducted less well than we would like, may pose important questions about the manner of Barth's actual *practice*, they do less to indict his theological *theory* of conversation. As David Ford argues, 'there is only a limited number of exchanges any guest can take part in, and nobody needs to know what is going on in every conversation' (Ford, 1999, p. 271). Nevertheless,

I do not see how theology which is related to a God who relates to everything and everyone can in principle limit its questions and conversations [T]he central truths are such that they cry out to be related to the whole of reality and to every

human being, with intensive conversation as one important way of doing this (Ford, 2001. pp.566f).

However unnecessarily pugilistic he may sometimes have been, Barth's trenchant commitment to the theological interpretation of his opponents, and to doing conversational battle with all comers, are not signs of arrogant failure, but of belief in God.

Conversing with Barth

The essays in this book explore in various ways Barth's openness to conversation, asking how much his theology was developed in explicit conversations with figures in and beyond the Christian tradition, and asking whether it can contribute to contemporary theological conversations without stifling them. This much is true by design, and a response by each author to the editors' initial challenge to write about 'Barth in conversation'. However, a further, unplanned commonality has emerged as the various papers have been assembled – a commonality which perhaps suggests a broad front along which conversation with Barth is most urgent, most interesting, and most productive. If the initial unifying theme was the openness of Barth's theology to conversation, this emergent unifying theme is the related openness of Barth's theology to the particularity, diversity, complexity, and messiness of human life and history.

John Webster tackles the interlocking of these two themes directly, arguing that Barth's conversational way with the theological tradition rests firmly upon a theological understanding of history. That understanding does not reduce the complexity and fragility of that history to a series of agreements or disagreements with some accessible deposit which would provide the true content of history – Barth does not, in Webster's

phrase, approach the theological tradition's figures 'with a dogmatic checklist in hand'. Rather, Webster argues, Barth has both eyes open to these figures' struggle 'towards Christianness', their hopeful but fallible turning towards the one source of theology who is no more confined to Barth's possession than to theirs. This theological recognition of their humanity funds Barth's practice of conversation.

A similar question, as to whether Barth had time for history, is tackled by both Eugene Rogers and Mike Higton. Rogers returns to the familiar question about Barth's pneumatology, and takes it in a new direction by pushing further Barth's conversation with Athanasius. He suggests that, at least once we have distinguished the tones of this conversation from those of Barth's louder conversation with Schleiermacher, the conversation with Athanasius might allow us to fill in some of the blanks in Barth's treatment of the Spirit – and that doing so might allow us to see how Barth's theology can be opened still further to the unpredictable flourishing of human freedom and doxology which the Spirit cultivates in history.

Mike Higton argues that Barth's practice of figural interpretation in his treatment of the doctrine of election, particularly when it is approached via a conversation with Hans Frei and Erich Auerbach's Dante, already demonstrates Barth's appreciation of the endlessly particular, endlessly surprising fulfilment of history. Barth's figural interpretation allows him to do justice to the historical density and irreducibility of Scriptural narratives, and also – potentially – to the historical density and irreducibility of creaturely existence in general. Recognising this might allow us to use the *Dogmatics* in new, more productive ways.

Similar issues are raised by Ben Quash's investigation of Barth's understanding of human freedom. Quash revisits the conversation between Barth and Hans Urs von

Balthasar and, as well as tracing some of the profound commonalities linking the two theologians, puts forward the initially surprising suggestion that, despite the impression that Balthasar tries to do more justice than Barth to the exercise of human freedom, it may well be Barth who has the more adequate framework. Where ‘Von Balthasar wants the *free* embrace of *obedience*’, he says, Barth ‘wants in the creature the *obedient* embrace of *freedom*.’ Quash suggests that Balthasar can still offer to Barth a more robust account of human action’s participation in Christ’s action, but nevertheless argues that there might be in Barth a considerably more joyful celebration of the possibilities of creaturely freedom than has normally been recognised.

Katherine Sonderegger addresses these questions of obedience and freedom in a rather different way, by examining the nature of theology’s responsibility to the givenness of Gospel history. Witness to this history structures and regulates Barth’s dogmatics, and Sonderegger demonstrates that this regulation flows materially from a theology of the theologian’s obedient hearing of the Word of God, a listening in order to assent which is itself the gift of proper freedom. Sonderegger contrasts this model with that of Robert Jenson, who proposes instead a rather different understanding of the theologian’s task in history, centred on the model of the theologian as interpreter. Sonderegger argues that this model must be tested by the same criticisms which Barth levelled at Bultmann.

George Hunsinger addresses Barth’s openness to the gradual stumbling growth of the Christian life in history, by hosting a conversation between Barth, Luther and Calvin. He explains that Barth’s soteriology attempts to hold together Luther’s insistence on the *simul iustus et peccator* with Calvin’s insistence on the simultaneity of justification and sanctification. Hunsinger describes three related moves that Barth

makes in order to hold these together: a reconsideration of the meaning of our participation in Christ, a reconsideration of the meaning of Christ's presence to faith, and a reconsideration of the meaning of sanctification. Hunsinger suggests that, despite Barth's decisive advances in soteriology, a question about the room which Barth leaves for growth, development and maturity in the Christian life still presses, and calls us to further theological work.

Graham Ward and Timothy Gorringer both examine the relationship between Barth and culture. Ward tackles the thorny issue of the possibility of Christian apologetics. What would it mean for one who is renowned for depicting theology as a conversation of faith with faith to conduct apologetics? Ward maintains that the one place it cannot operate from, for a Christian theologian, is some unmediated access to the Word in the world that could then be wielded like a weapon or used like a tool. While Ward notes in Barth's discourse an illegitimate attempt to police its own boundaries, he also is able to trace, by bringing Barth into conversation with Hegel, an admission in Barth of theology's own cultural embeddedness and its interdependence with the discourses of other disciplines.

Tim Gorringer's essay similarly explores the popular image of a Barth who had no time for culture, except in those hours he spent engrossed in Mozart's music. He suggests that, if instead of the narrower definitions of *Kultur* present in the German tradition we turn instead to the more variegated discussion of Culture by such Anglo-Saxon voices as Arnold, Eliot, Williams and Eagleton, a different picture emerges. This is an unusual juxtaposition, but then Barth 'was always more surprising than a strict reading of his theology suggests'. On the one hand, culture has, Gorringer suggests, an entirely proper if strictly limited role for Barth; on the other, several of these Anglo-

Saxon theorists of culture also have an inkling of the brokenness of culture. In the face of various forms of ‘barbarism’ which confront both theologians and these theorists of culture, Gorringer suggests that there is room here for ‘worthwhile engagement’ or, at the very least, a ‘fruitful contradiction’.

John McDowell also explores Barth’s openness to culture, contrasting Barth’s theological openness to Mozart’s music with Donald MacKinnon’s openness to tragic literature. By drawing on MacKinnon, McDowell is able to ask whether Barth can do justice to that which ruptures thought and practice – that which Barth names *Das Nichtige* – whilst still holding fast to Christian hope. He suggests that the nature of that hope cannot be allowed to elide too easily the questions that a reading of the tragic can put to it, and argues that, with MacKinnon’s and tragedy’s help, we can locate much in Barth that is open to the darkness of history and resistant to any too-easily triumphant reading.

Lastly, David Clough examines one example of theology’s sensitivity to the tragic in history, by exploring the way in which Barth allowed the clarity of his theological commitments to peace to be responsive to the extreme possibility of war. Clough explores Barth’s understanding of the possibility of ‘exceptional cases’, in which obedience in the midst of history might have to a form which opposes all the more general lines of the guidance which we have received from the Gospel; he examines John H. Yoder’s criticism of this claim in the case of Barth’s account of war – suggesting that, although Barth’s acceptance of the possibility of exceptional cases is better justified than Yoder allowed, nevertheless his handling of it in this particular case is inadequate.

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Notes

¹ Richard Roberts puts his own version of this kind of criticism like this: Barth's isolation of theology after the *Römerbrief* of 1922 leads to the 'dangerously close collusion between his voice and that of God'. This entails a 'totalitarian' method that 'demands conformity and submission rather than critical investigation' (Roberts, 1991, p. xv).

² An article by John Milbank on 'The End of Dialogue' provides a useful explication of this point. When complaining of the unchallenged assumptions of many involved in the talk of 'dialogue' in the area of religious pluralism, he argues that 'dialogue' is 'a profoundly ethnocentric illusion' that assumes a commonly recognised subject matter by both (or all) participants, and partners will progress to a sympathetic comprehension of the each others' perspectives (Milbank, 1990, p. 177). 'The very idea that dialogue is a passage for the delivery of truth, that it has a privileged relationship to Being, assumes that many voices are coalescing around a single known object which is independent of our biographical or transbiographical processes of coming-to-know' (Milbank, 1990, p. 177). 'Dialogue', in other words, may prove to be too ideological a discourse for theologians to participate in, too seeped through with a modern capitalist value-system, and thus too easily preventative of the truth-of-difference.

³ David Burrell suggests that the nature of the pressure to perform on contemporary academic theologians could seriously disturb this primarily ecclesial space for conversation. 'The overweening academic context of a university can easily impel the

theologians operating within it towards a conversation preoccupied with their academic colleagues rather than one focused on the community of believers' (Burrell, 2000, p. 21). '[I]t is easy to see how such an environment can lull the conversants into a certain set of presuppositions while marginalising other perspectives of the kingdom of God' (Burrell, 2000, p. 22). Barth complained of the academic 'independence of theology in relation to other sciences.... It is indeed unfortunate that the question of the truth of talk about God should be handled as a question apart by a special faculty' (*CD I/1*, p. 5). While this positioning may have been occasioned by current academic practice, it gives theology an honour simultaneously too great (as if it possesses 'special keys to special doors', and has a 'despair of the world') and too small (theology does not then show that what other disciplines say about it derives from 'alien principles', *CD I/1*, p. 6). Hence Barth announces that 'Theology is the science which finally sets this task [talking of God], and this task alone, subordinating to this task all other possible tasks in the human search for truth.' The word 'subordinating' is crucial here, suggesting reading all other disciplines theologically rather than ignoring them in order to do theology.

⁴ Harnack feels that Barth dispenses with historical science, and that is a foolish move: 'his point of view ... opens the gate to every suitable fantasy and to every theological dictatorship which dissolves the historical ingredient of our religion and seeks to torment the conscience of others with one's own heuristic knowledge.' (in Barth, 1972, p. 39) Barth complains of Harnack accusation that he did not listen to others because he already knows both the questions and answers (Barth, 1972, p. 40).

⁵ This admission undoes George Schner's comment that 'conversation' accords an active role to the theologian 'over the *receptive* moment of the religious attitude, an obvious debt to modernity's emphasis on rationality as constructive' (Schner, 2000, p. 30).

⁶ See also Barth, 1972, pp.16f.; McFadyen, 2000, p. 50.

⁷ For an examination of this in the context of explicating Barth's critique of natural theology see McDowell, 2002.

⁸ Elsewhere Marshall correctly argues that Barth's christocentrism does not stipulate about the details of the process of revelation's subjective appropriation, since, as Thiemann indicates, Barth means by the term 'revelation' primarily the *content* of our knowing of God (Marshall, 1987, pp.148f; cf. Thiemann, 1991, p. 84). In a statement not unrelated, Barth himself affirmed, 'No one can say how this is done, not even the most devout and learned theologians of all times have been able to hear the Christmas message' (Barth, 1959, p. 25).

⁹ See Karl Barth (1963), *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley, London: Collins, 37f.

¹⁰ Later in *CD IV/3* Barth articulates the sense of this in terms of what he calls 'the little light of creation' (*CD IV/3.1*, §69.2).

¹¹ Kenneth Surin argues that 'In this monologue, the pluralist ... speaks well of the other but never to the other, and indeed cannot do otherwise because there really is no intractable other for the pluralist.' (Surin, 1990, p. 200)

¹² ‘But true education cannot rest with preferences, so an authentic theology will be called upon to present an alternative to a consumer society which so easily infects the exercise of academe as well, and we find that the best way to do that is by critically appropriating the fullness of a faith-tradition’ (Burrell, 2000, p. 23).

¹³ ‘The inevitable outcome has been a sheer inattentiveness on the part of these thinkers to the intricacies and complexities and political configurations which circumscribe their reflections’ (Surin, 1990, p. 202). ‘*Serious* dialogue indeed requires openness to change, but it also demands a sense of how significant changing one’s faith would be’ (Placher, 1989, p. 149).

¹⁴ These two together mean that Barth refuses a primarily historical or cultural analysis of other theologians. It is not that these are invalid – they can be done and no doubt should be done. But as a theologian, his task is different. It is to pay others the compliment of taking them seriously as theologians, even if that means claiming that they are utterly mistaken; for this task historical or cultural analysis can only be a preparatory move.

¹⁵ Barth follows his opening remarks in his *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* with the claims that ‘Of course, there is no method, not even a theological one, by means of which we can be certain of catching sight of theology. In this way, too, it can escape us, because we are inadequate to the task it poses’ (Barth, 1972, p. 15). Characteristically, however, Barth cannot let the matter rest there and comments on the risky but necessary venture of theology.