

to be a comprehensive treatment of the topic, but rather a moment of *engagement* between public theology and culture. It is not unlike the collection of essays in the *festschrift* for Duncan Forrester, *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*<sup>2</sup> Like that earlier volume, the present one is acutely British. As such, it is an important book for pastors and others desiring to engage theologically with British culture in an increasingly secularized and pluralistic situation. The excellent essays here provide skillful and thought-provoking models for how this might be done. Meanwhile, their publication in one volume offers a helpful stimulus for the Gospel's future proclamation in Britain, suggesting a theme this book hopes to cultivate – that British culture must again reckon with a robust and public Christian theology that intends to shape her once more.

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*Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Bruce L. McCormack, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008, pp. 317, ISBN 978-0801035821. £18.00

Back in 1995 Bruce L. McCormack's reworked doctoral thesis was published under the rather daunting title, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936*.<sup>3</sup> This book marked something of a revolution in Barth studies, to the extent that its central thesis has since largely been accepted as authoritative: that there was in fact no 'turn to analogy' in Barth's theology after *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, his 1931 book on Anselm, but that he remained a dialectical theologian throughout. Certainly, the comprehensiveness of the biographical and theological detail, and the insistence on the point, make it hard to dispute, and so the

<sup>2</sup> William Storrar and Andrew Morton, eds, *Public Theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (T. & T. Clark, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

book succeeded in establishing McCormack as among the foremost of modern Barthian scholars. However, that early book covered only the first half of Barth's theological career, ending with the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*. Now 13 years later, a collection of McCormack's subsequent essays have been bound together in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* – a volume which could be characterised as the long-awaited 'sequel'.

The essays here gathered together span a number of years, from 1994–2007, and are arranged in a rough chronology within four sections. The first of these sections deals with Barth's relationship to nineteenth-century theology, in particular that of Schleiermacher, to the extent that something of a reconciliation is posited – albeit within certain strict limits. Indeed, McCormack's contention is that a 'vital Reformed Theology of the future' (42) will combine an appreciation of both theological traditions.

The second grouping of essays moves on in time and consists of two substantial pieces of work on Barth's relationship to the post-liberal and post-modern movements in twentieth-century theology. With a foot in both the English- and the German-speaking theological worlds, McCormack contends that 'Barth's theology has been poorly understood in America and Great Britain' (113), and sets about rescuing Barth from the clutches of the kind of 'postliberal intratextuality' espoused by George Lindbeck and others of the 'Yale School'.

Part 3, "Karl Barth's Theological Ontology", is where things get really interesting. Here McCormack tackles Barth on the Doctrine of Election: this section is also on average the most recently written, and contains a reprint of "Grace and Being", McCormack's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*.<sup>4</sup> The reprint is necessarily, for McCormack intends that this essay be 'taken together' with the following two as dealing with the latter part of Barth's theological development. (294) One could say that it is these three essays which truly constitute the 'sequel' to his first book.

Finally, the fourth section is a collection of short but pertinent

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<sup>4</sup> John Webster, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

“Occasional Writings”, gathering up some of McCormack’s more disparate contributions to theological journals in Europe and America. These include a welcome translation of his introduction to the German edition of his *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. This German edition was published in 2006, and McCormack takes the opportunity to reflect on the development of his theology in the years since the initial English publication.

McCormack’s chosen title, *Orthodox and Modern*, is an attempt to thematize what might otherwise have been a fairly loose collection. In naming Barth as ‘orthodox’, he is deliberately opposing the ‘neo-orthodox’ label often applied to Barth within American theology, while the epithet ‘modern’ marks a rejection of attempts to claim Barth for the post-modern camp. Beyond these essentially ‘negative’ connotations, however, are the positive points which McCormack wants to make concerning Barth’s theology. Barth’s ‘modernity’, for example, he locates in three particular tenets: his basically Kantian (and Neo-Kantian) actualistic epistemology, in which God ‘is what he does’; his embracing of biblical criticism; and his ‘tendency to historicize’ (13), that is, to emphasise the actual historical event that was Jesus Christ as God’s free act of ‘being in becoming’.

In my opinion, however, the main interest of these essays lies in their treatment of Barth’s ‘orthodoxy’. This McCormack defines specifically as Protestant orthodoxy, in which the creeds and confessions of the Church are only *relatively* and not *absolutely* binding. This theme of *semper reformanda* becomes pressing in the essay “Karl Barth’s Historicized Christology: Just How Chalcedonian Is It?”, in which McCormack argues that the Chalcedonian doctrine of the ‘two natures’ of Christ is based on a metaphysical philosophy which is at odds with an actualistic understanding of God. Indeed, although Barth generally assents to the creedal affirmations and is faithful to what he understands as the ‘values’ of the Chalcedon formula, he is nevertheless committed, as McCormack puts it, to ‘reconstruct[ing] the whole of ‘orthodox’ teaching from the ground up.’ (16)

While this standpoint has profound ecumenical implications, McCormack is dismissive of an ‘uncritical’ acceptance of the ancient creeds of the Church, given that humanly-conceived doctrines

can never correspond perfectly to the Word of God. Indeed, he is somewhat despairing of the tendency among post-liberal theologians, having invested so much in the Church as the key hermeneutical lens for reading the Bible, to turn their backs on the Reformed roots of the movement in order to embrace the greater ecclesiological certainties of Catholicism and Orthodoxy. There is an extent to which McCormack is on a mission to uphold and reconstruct what is distinctive about the Reformed approach, while all around him one-time allies abandon the cause. Hence his absolute commitment to Barth: 'It is my own personal opinion', he writes, 'that Karl Barth's theology may be the best hope for a rebirth of a genuinely Protestant theology in America.' (283) His attitude to ecumenical dialogue, however, is far from cavalier, and he frequently stresses his commitment to this process.

Central to this 'reconstruction' of orthodoxy is Barth's treatment of the Doctrine of Election in *Church Dogmatics* II:2. Indeed, McCormack's understanding of the vital significance of this doctrine for Barth is what marks this collection of essays as the 'sequel' to his first book. If there is a 'turning point' in Barth's theology, then this is it! (McCormack even suggests that had it been possible to go back and rewrite the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth would have begun with Election rather than with Revelation.) Here Barth carries off the remarkable feat of 'reconstructing' Calvin's Doctrine of Election while remaining faithfully and recognisably within the Reformed tradition. McCormack sums up the difference neatly: where Calvin began by asking, 'To whom does election apply?', Barth, as always, begins with God: 'Who is the God who elects?' (185) For Barth, this means that the Doctrine of Election has profound ontological significance: if God 'is what he does', in Barth's actualistic scheme then Jesus Christ is not only the one who is elected and rejected by God, but as the Second Person of the Trinity is also the one who elects and rejects himself – he is both the Object and the Subject of election. This means that the 'eternal Son' cannot be abstracted from the historical person Jesus Christ in whom God has eternally elected to be God-for-us, for the immanent Trinity has to be 'wholly identical in content with the economic Trinity'. (191) Moreover, we can now avoid metaphysics altogether and we can talk about the triune God '*without engaging in speculation*'. (183) According to Barth, there is no 'essence' of the

divine somewhere behind its 'expression' in Jesus Christ: rather, the activity of God in Jesus Christ is actually constitutive of the divine essence, including his humanity and his suffering. (188) 'What has happened', writes McCormack in the subsequent essay, 'is that the actualism which had always governed Barth's talk of the divine act of relating to the human had now been pressed back into the very being of God'. (218)

The significance of this reworking of election becomes clear when McCormack explores Barth's reworking of Chalcedonian Christology mentioned above. Now, this new 'actualistic ontology' gives Barth the tools to challenge the Platonic metaphysics of the two natures of Christ. The problem with this metaphysical starting point is that the 'two natures' doctrine separates the Eternal Son from his decision to be human for us, with the effect that the Eternal Word and the Incarnate Word are illegitimately distinguished from one another. By contrast, Barth suggests that the old metaphysical formula of two 'natures' in one 'person' could faithfully be replaced with an actualistic formula of two 'histories' – God's history and human history – brought together in the one history of the man Jesus Christ. (228) This is not to invalidate the old formula, but to ground it much more firmly in the revelation of the electing God.

For depth and breadth of scholarship it is impossible to fault McCormack. However, as a small complaint, I was occasionally frustrated by the lack of a bibliography either at the end of each essay or at the conclusion of the volume as a whole: the footnotes are copious and hunting through them for a reference was an onerous task. More importantly, where the interest in his first book lay in his masterful interweaving of biographical detail with theological development, these essays are in many ways more about McCormack's theological development than about Barth's: as the writer himself admits, they constitute a 'record of how my thinking has progressed and where it is now headed'. (17) It is none the worse for that – but it does leave one with the feeling that the true 'sequel' to *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* is still to be written. One can only hope it will be. Nevertheless, this volume must suffice for the time being, and it has much to add to our understanding of Barth's theology. 'There has been', McCormack remarks ruefully, 'a marked tendency in much

English-language research to move too quickly to ‘use’ of Barth’s theology before having acquired a proper understanding’. (165) This collection of essays will go a long way towards remedying that.

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*The Hint Half Guessed*, Alastair Hulbert, Edinburgh: J. R. Reid, 2008, pp. 237, ISBN 978-0-948785-07-8. £9.00<sup>5</sup>

Alastair Hulbert is one of a number of divinity students of the sixties who, on completion of their studies, decided not to follow the normal ministerial route, but living out a radical understanding of the gospel and a consistent theology chose a particularly difficult, costly and unrewarding path, for the most part outside the institutional church. In his case, his version of the Christian life and mission took him to a bewildering variety of situations. In this work, sub-titled “Mission, Ecumenism and Other Things”, he presents a number of essays, articles, reports and even a poem or two, arranged in chronological order, reflecting his thought and action during the successive phases of his career.

Hulbert’s first five years after graduating were spent with the French Protestant Industrial Mission, which meant this scholarly young Scot, son of the Manse, working as a welder in factories in Roubaix and Paris. Then followed fifteen years with the World Student Christian Federation, which took him all over the world, including the Middle East, South America and the U.S. The next chapter in his career saw him with the Scottish Churches Action for World Development, which involved him in life in Nicaragua, where he reflected on and critiqued the ideology of development which was largely being taken for granted by Western powers, including some of the third world aid agencies.

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<sup>5</sup> Available from Cornerstone Bookshop, Edinburgh or from the author, 27 Reid Terrace, Edinburgh EH3 5JH.